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CRIME BUSTERS

JULY, 1938

STREET & SMITH

8 Great Stories

THE MAD MAGICIAN
MAXWELL GRANT

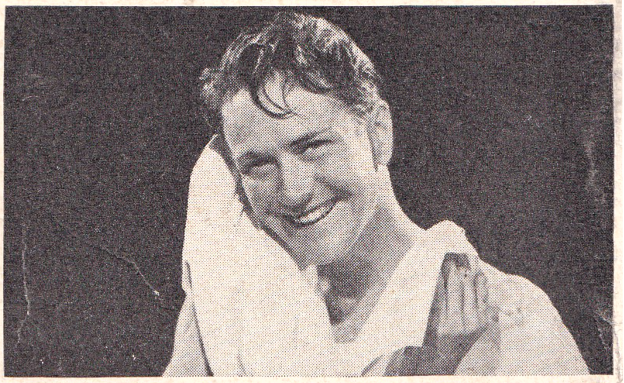
BLACK QUEEN
THEODORE TINSLEY

A MAN AND A MES
LESTER DENT

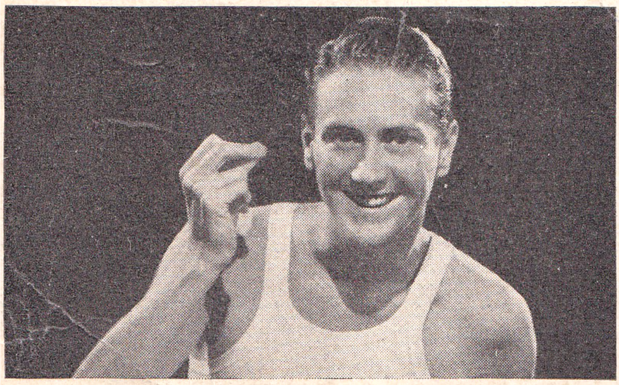
"KEYHOLE," "RED" BRENNAN and Other Stories

How I got rid of Dandruff for keeps–with Listerine

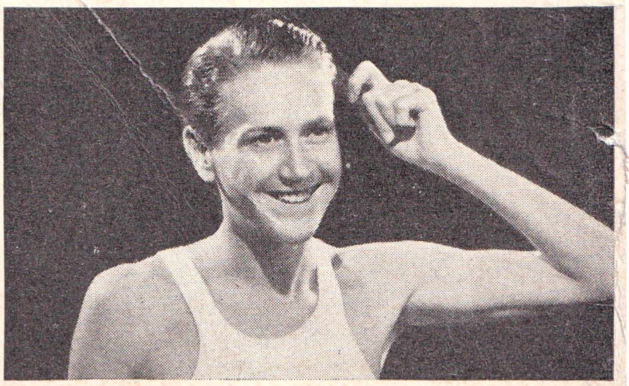
In desperation, I called up my doctor about a severe case of dandruff which ordinary remedies hadn't done a thing for. "Try Listerine Antiseptic," he said. "It kills the germ that causes dandruff."



I doused on Listerine just as it came from the bottle, and followed it with massage. Those ugly flakes began to go—that annoying itching stopped. My scalp felt marvelously clean and cool.



Man, was I grateful to Listerine! I kept the treatment up every day for about four weeks, using a little olive oil because my scalp was excessively dry.



At the end of that time I didn't have a trace of dandruff. And I have prevented a recurrence by using Listerine occasionally since then.

Listerine kills Pityrosporum ovale, the germ which causes dandruff

If you have the slightest symptoms of dandruff, start today with daily Listerine massages. Such an easy, delightful treatment! Scalp and hair begin to feel so fresh and cool and clean. Itching and burning stops in an amazingly short time. Remember, you're attacking the *germ* which causes dandruff when you use Listerine. In one actual clinical test 76% of the dandruff patients who used Listerine Antiseptic twice a day showed either complete disappearance of, or marked improvement in, the symptoms of dandruff at the end of *four weeks*. We know of no other dandruff remedy with a similar clinical record.

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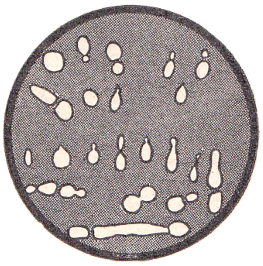


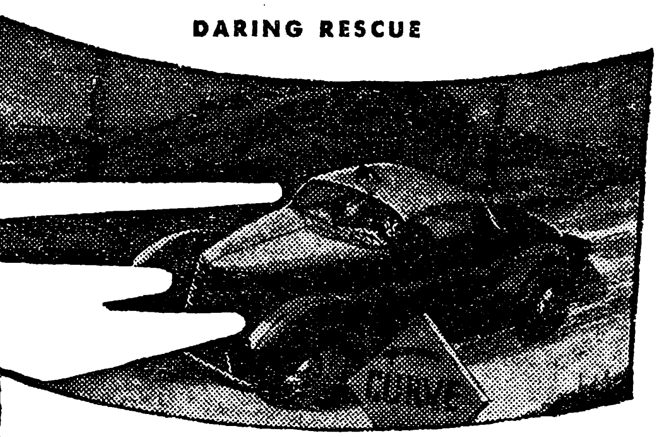
Pityrosporum ovale, as it looks under the microscope, magnified many times.

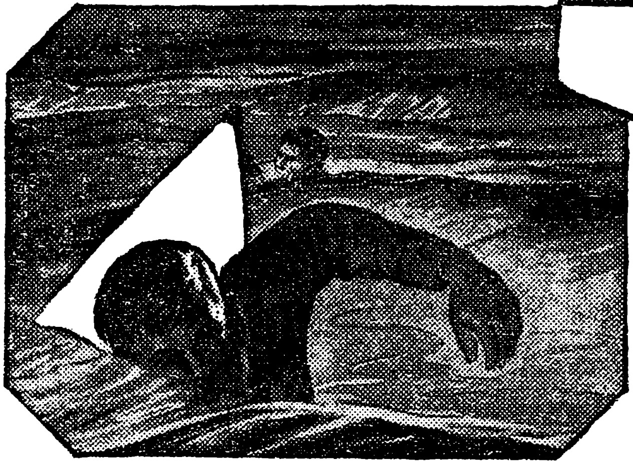
The PROVED treatment for DANDRUFF

THEY PRIED THE LID OFF DAVY JONES' LOCKER!

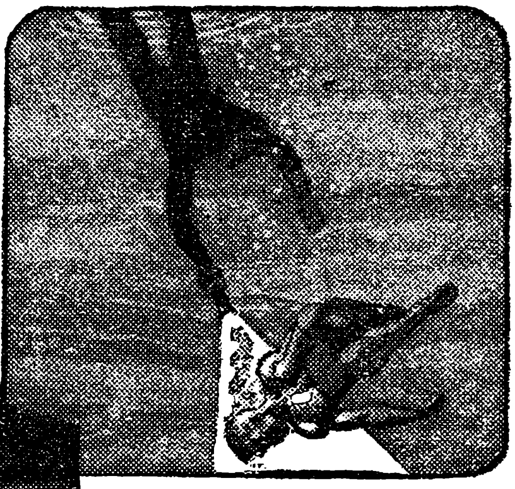
Patrolman Ernest Saftig, former life-guard, of 4487 47th Street, San Diego, California, whose courage and presence of mind snatched the life of a reckless beach-party swimmer from the sea.

POLICE BLOTTER REVEALS DARING RESCUE





"It was 2:30 A.M. The radio in our car barked our number, 'Crystal Pier, a drowning, rush.' From the pier, my partner, Richard V. Disney, of 3230 Whittier Street, and I, heard faint cries.



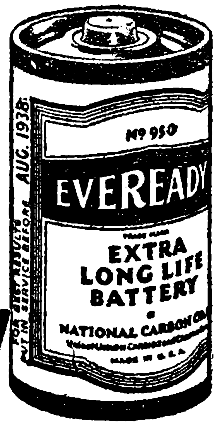
"When I reached the man he was about done for. As I battled the undertow to bring him in, he slipped from my grasp and sank.

"In the darkness I couldn't find his body. Then Disney gave me his flashlight, and because it kept burning, I was able to locate the victim by diving.

"Together, Disney and I brought the body ashore, and then...

"With the glow of the flashlight on that cold, pallid face that seemed stilled forever, we tried artificial respiration...and it worked! If ever a man was saved by the faithful performance of fresh DATED 'Eveready' batteries, this man was.

(Signed) Ernest Saftig"



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Volume II July, 1938 Number 3

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

THE MAD MAGICIAN . . . By Maxwell Grant 6

It took Norgil's complete bag of tricks to trap this madman!

HOW OUR READERS VOTED 21

All the votes are counted up for you!

A MAN AND A MESS . . . . By Lester Dent 22

Click Rush, still trailing Bufa, gets behind the eight ball!

TONG WAR . . . . . . By Alan Hathway 40

There were traitors in the Society of the Crescent Moon—and trouble for The Keyhole!

BLACK QUEEN . . . . . By Theodore Tinsley 56

Pretty Carrie Cashin tangles with a gal four thousand years old!

SHANGHAI RENEGADE . . . . By Steve Fisher 74

In war-torn China, there's double-crossing death for many!

CHIEF BENNETT OF FAIRFIELD 89

Another great American Crime Buster.

FUR COAT MURDER . . . . By Frank Gruber 92

Jim Strong, the Racket Man, gets hot on the trail of some fur coats!

THREE PENCILS OF DEATH . By George Allan Moffatt 108

Duncan Dean gets paid handsomely—for being the fall guy!

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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC., 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.

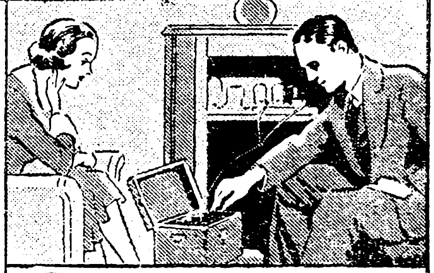
I jumped from $18 a week to $50 -- a Free Book started me toward this GOOD PAY IN RADIO

HERE'S How it Happened

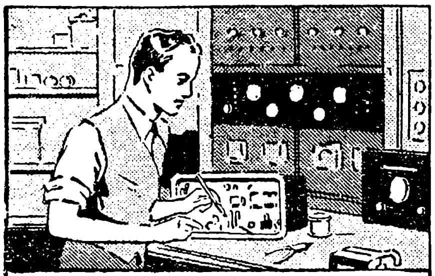
by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

EMPLOYEES ONLY

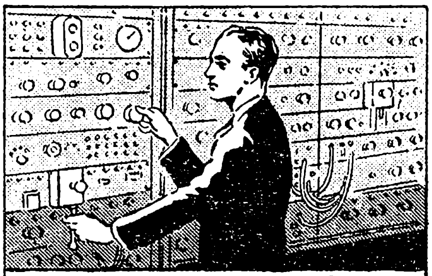
"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory. I'd probably be at it today if I hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them."



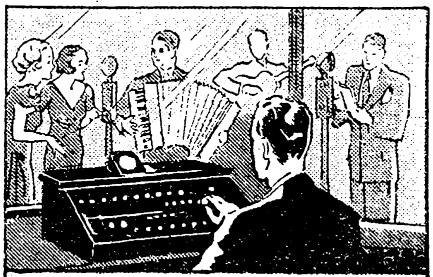
"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $5, $10, $15 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



"When I finished training I accepted a job as serviceman with a Radio store. In three weeks I was made service manager at more than twice what I earned in the shoe factory."



"Eight months later N.R.I. Employment Department sent me to Station KWCR as a Radio operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI. I am also connected with Television Station W9XK."



"N.R.I. Training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio is growing fast. The field is wide open to properly trained men."

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Many Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Do you too want a better job? Do you too want to make more money? Radio offers many spare time and full time opportunities for good pay.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays *many $200 to $500 a year—full* time servicing jobs pay many $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts are operating full or part time Radio businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay, see the world. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems, offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio.

Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Almost every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets showing how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and ideas that made good spare time money for hundreds. I send Special Equipment to conduct experiments, build circuits, get practical experience. I ALSO GIVE YOU A COMPLETE, MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT TO HELP SERVICE SETS QUICKER—SAVE TIME, MAKE MORE MONEY.

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Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time *and full time opportunities, also those* coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows you 131 letters from men I trained, shows what they are doing, earning; shows my Money Back Agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on penny post card—NOW!

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out spare time and full time opportunities in Radio, and explains your practical method of training at home in spare time to become a Radio Expert. (Please write plainly.)

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THE MAD MAGICIAN

By Maxwell Grant

Norgil's act goes wrong—so he uses his bag of tricks for a show to save his life!

A "Norgil" Novelette

CHAPTER I.

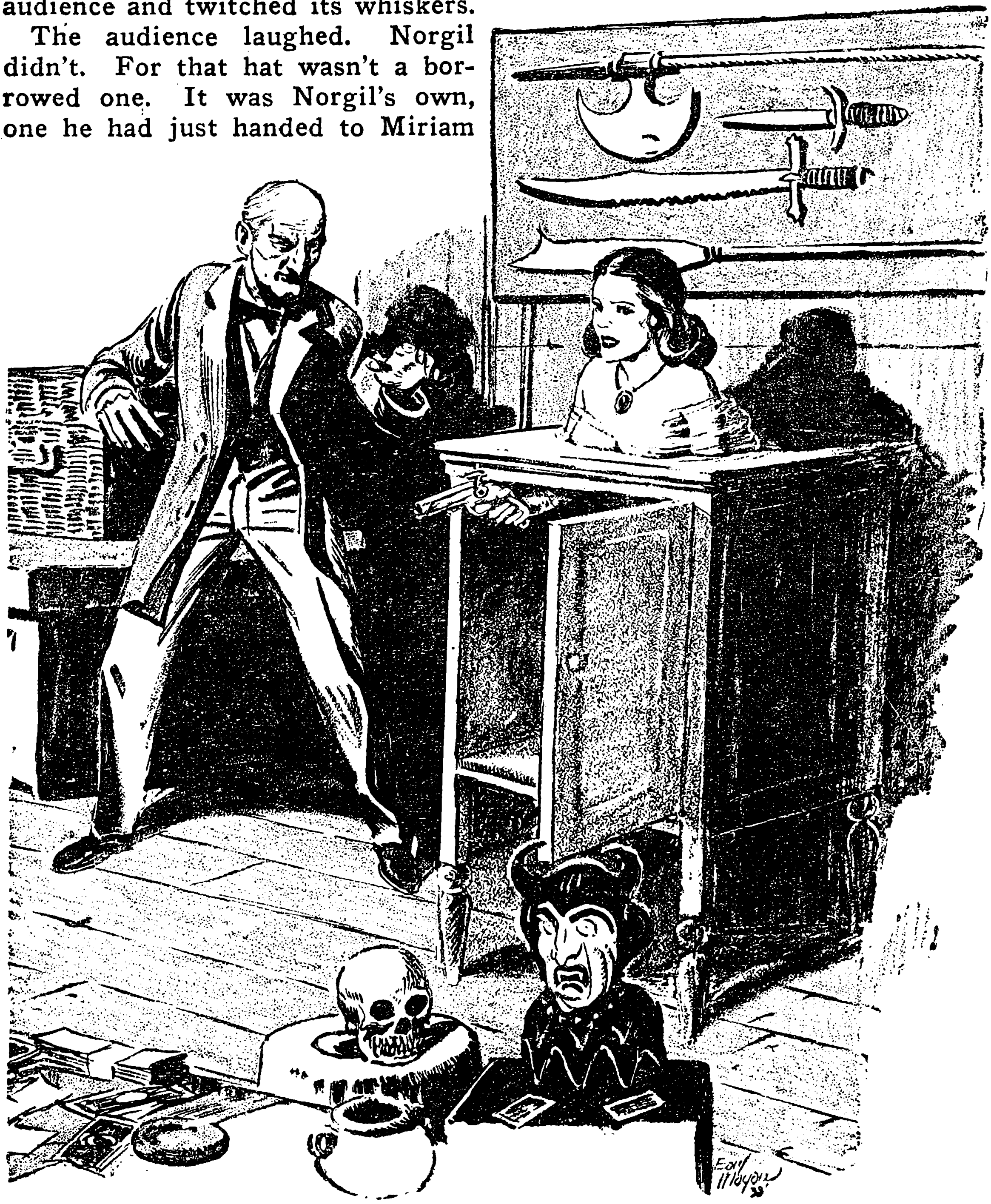
WORD FROM A WIZARD.

A WHITE rabbit poked its head from the silk hat, took a look at the audience and twitched its whiskers.

The audience laughed. Norgil didn't. For that hat wasn't a borrowed one. It was Norgil's own, one he had just handed to Miriam as he began his act. Producing rabbits was Norgil's specialty—but the bunnies always came from borrowed hats, never from his own.

Moreover, the rabbit wasn't one of Norgil's. He had run out of white rabbits and had been trying to get some new ones ever since he reached town.

The magician's neatly mustached face was grim as he looked at Miriam. Worry showed in the expression of the trim brunette. She could read Norgil's thoughts. He was cursing himself for ever sending his



valuable assistant, Fritz, on that mission tonight and letting Miriam take responsibility for preparing the act.

Yet she had done it before, and handled things well. But something was radically wrong now. Miriam was as much surprised as Norgil. Both were wondering how the rabbit had gotten into the hat, and where it had come from in the first place!

Misgivings became a nightmare. The rabbit merely prefaced other unexpected things that happened. Miriam came forward with a dove and paper bag. Norgil shoved the bird into the bag and gestured toward an empty cage held by another assistant. He then fired a revolver shot and exploded the paper bag.

The dove was gone. The trick had worked all right, provided the dove had reappeared in the cage. But the audience saw the cage before Norgil had a chance to look for it, and the spectators howled gleefully.

A bird had appeared in the cage, sure enough, but it wasn't a dove! Norgil saw the assistant gawking at a bantam rooster, that was wagging its beak in an effort to voice an indignant crow.

Muttering to himself, Norgil faked a smile in response to the laughter that rolled in from every cranny of the theater. If the crowd out front thought the comedy was intended, Norgil was ready to make the best of it. Unfortunately, other tricks weren't due for the same hilarious finish.

ASSISTANTS wheeled a trunk on the stage. Norgil showed the trunk to be empty, and the audience could see beneath the platform on which the trunk stood. Suavely, the magician asked the audience to choose one flag from those of several nations. The choice was "Holland." Norgil bowed, waiting while the other flags were carried off, then he turned toward the trunk.

The magician held his revolver. All he needed was Miriam's cue that she was ready; then, a blank shot would bring her from the trunk, clad in Dutch attire from winged hat to wooden shoes. It was lucky that Norgil waited for that cue. It didn't come.

Instead, there was Miriam's plaintive whisper as she poked the trunk lid a half inch upward:

"I can't come out! I haven't any costume!"

Norgil beckoned savagely toward the wing. Curtains closed in, while the audience guffawed at the failure of the trunk trick. Close to the footlights, Norgil tried to fill the gap with some sure-fire card tricks, while an assistant reorganized the show. But the card tricks nearly wrecked the act entirely.

When Norgil yanked the pack from his pocket, and began to change the spots by passing his hand over the cards, he found that he had a deck of blanks. Only his own daze saved him, for when the spectators saw his stupefied look, they thought he was clowning more than ever.

Then the curtains parted. More tricks were ready, and someone had set them straight. Mechanically, Norgil moved into his routine and finished the show amid remnants of laughter. When the curtains finally closed, he shook off some helpers who were swearing that they didn't know why things had gone wrong.

It wasn't the time for alibis or apologies. Those could come later. For the present, Norgil wanted the seclusion of his dressing room.

HE reached it, sliding his dress coat from his shoulders and ripping off his white tie and collar. Norgil plopped into a chair before his dressing table and switched on bright lights around the mirror, preparatory to removing his make-up.

Planking his elbows on the dressing table, Norgil propped his chin in both hands, to steady his whirling thoughts. Then, swiftly, he was leaning forward, eyes intent.

There on the mirror before his gaze, letters had formed themselves. Dark, scrawly letters, and they made the three words:

READ THE CARD

Norgil tilted his head sideward and his smile returned. To another this final happening might have seemed a further link in a chain of inexplicable incidents. But not to Norgil. The message written on the mirror simply proved that someone had deliberately gummed the act, and had topped off the procedure with a very old stunt.

The message had been written in secret ink, but heat from the electric-light bulbs had again made the writing visible.

Instructions to "read the card" did not puzzle Norgil. He dug in his pocket, brought out the blank pack that someone had planted there. Among the fifty-odd blanks, the magician found one card with a message in green ink, as scribbly as the writing on the mirror. It read:

> You will pardon my interference with your splendid act. I did it to acquaint you with the clever methods which I, a fellow magician, possess. I have many tricks that will interest you. Wait in your dressing room until you receive a call from me.
>
> Professor Caradoc

Norgil had never heard of Professor Caradoc, but he was convinced that the mystery man must certainly have some clever methods.

At the bottom of the card, Professor Caradoc had added:

> P. S. Heat this card and learn more.

To Norgil, the postscript indicated that Professor Caradoc had written something else, using lemon juice, which would remain invisible until the card was heated. As though to humor the absent professor, Norgil gave a smile, struck a match and held it beneath the card.

Three seconds later, Norgil was convinced that Professor Caradoc was quite as clever as he claimed. No more writing appeared along with the greenish ink.

Instead, the card gave a sudden crackle and vanished in a sheet of instantaneous flame, from between Norgil's finger tips!

CHAPTER II.

STRANGE HOUSE.

NORGIL was dressed in street clothes when Miriam knocked on the dressing-room door. At the magician's instruction, she came in, tears in her lovely eyes. She started to say, "I'm sorry about the show. I—I can't understand——"

Norgil stepped quickly forward and patted the girl's arm. A smile was again on his face, as he said, "It was not your fault, Miriam. It was all a ruse played on me, something I've learned about since returning here to the dressing room. It's funny, though, that I didn't see this person around before the performance——"

"There was someone!" Miriam interjected quickly. "An old fellow with whiskers, roaming around backstage. He looked harmless, and nobody chased him——"

Norgil's deft fingers snapped. "Then that could have been Professor Caradoc!" he exclaimed. "He must have——" The magician broke off as his phone rang. It was a handset on a side table.

When he lifted the receiver, a wheezy voice spoke across the wire, introducing the talker as Professor Caradoc. The mystery man was profuse with apologies for the way he had first introduced himself. But he trusted that Norgil would forgive him, and pay an immediate visit to Caradoc's home.

"You must come alone"—the wheezy voice was almost fearful—"otherwise I cannot admit you. I am mistrustful of strangers, since most of them wish to steal the secrets of my marvelous creations. But you are an important man, Mr. Norgil. I feel that I can talk with you freely."

"All right, sir," agreed Norgil, glancing at Miriam. "I'll come. Tell me the address and I'll be over right away."

Caradoc gave the address and Norgil hung up. He glanced at his watch.

"That was the old fellow you mentioned, all right," he told the brunet girl. "He's harmless, so I'm going over to see him. I'll be back by eight o'clock, in time for the evening show——"

Miriam looked suddenly worried. "You've forgotten about Jenrick," she reminded the magacian. "He's coming to the hotel at eight o'clock. You have an appointment with him."

THE girl assistant was correct. Jenrick was a big money man from Chicago, and Norgil had been talking about the man for the past two weeks. Jenrick desired to form a partnership with the magician and start on a round-the-world tour. His promises had increased with every letter, until finally tonight's appointment had been made.

Norgil pulled a thick stack of letters from the pocket of the suit he had put on. "Here's Jenrick's correspondence," he told Miriam. "I brought the letters over from the hotel. Take them with you, and wait at the hotel until Jenrick arrives. I plan to be back there before him, but if I should be a few minutes late, keep him there until I return."

"Perhaps you'd rather have Fritz attend to it?" asked the assistant.

Norgil shook his head. "I sent Fritz on an errand. He was to call me, and hasn't. You'll have to wait for Jenrick."

Miriam ventured a question as she took the letters. She had heard much of Norgil's talk about Jenrick, and had a woman's natural curiosity. "How much is Jenrick willing to put up, boss?"

"Fifty thousand dollars," replied Norgil. "Provided that I can get ten thousand of my own. I have that much stowed away in the bank account.

"That's one reason"—the magician added a wise smile—"why I'm going to visit the old duck who just phoned me. We'll need some new stage illusions, if we start the world tour, and I think the old fellow has them."

Miriam agreed that it would be a good selling point with Jenrick. Norgil handed the brunet girl a check book to carry along with the letters. With another glance at his watch, he left the dressing room, after reminding Miriam to be at the hotel in time to meet Jenrick.

A TAXI took the magician to Caradoc's address. It wasn't a long trip, but the driver had some trouble picking the right house. The street was bumpy. The house itself was a grimy brick structure that formed part of an old row.

Most of the other houses were

empty, and there were no lights visible in Caradoc's place. Despite the dusk, Norgil made out drawn blinds and shuttered windows that indicated the place was occupied.

Evidently, Professor Caradoc was something of a recluse who had chosen this shabby neighborhood as one that offered sure seclusion. Calculating thus, Norgil dismissed the cab and mounted the stone steps of the two-story house.

The magician rang the bell three times during the next few minutes. Each time there was a faint clang in response. Finally, rusted bolts were drawn. A crack of light came from within when the door inched open. Norgil sensed the observation of peering eyes. The door swung inward.

Stepping into a tiny, lighted vestibule, Norgil saw no one for the moment. Then a figure popped into view from behind the door itself. Norgil saw a tall but stooped form, the back of a bald head, as the man shut the door. He watched scrawny fingers thrust the bolts shut.

The man turned around. Norgil met the gaze of tiny, brilliant eyes that formed the only life in a hollow-cheeked face which had saffron skin, drawn as tight as the surface of a snare drum. From dryish lips came a tone that was no longer wheezy, but harsh:

"I am Professor Caradoc."

When Norgil stared, Caradoc chuckled. The professor drew his long-nailed fingers over his smooth chin.

"You thought I had a beard," clucked Caradoc. "I did, this afternoon, but it was a false one. Remember"—his voice thinned to a whisper as his bony forefinger tapped Norgil's shoulder—"that I must always be cautious.

"The ideas in this brain"—the finger rose to tap Caradoc's bald forehead—"are valuable, very valuable. It is seldom that I choose to allow visitors here."

The whisper ended. There was a momentary pause; then Caradoc's voice was harsh again as he questioned:

"How long can you stay?"

Norgil consulted his watch. It was quarter past seven. That eight-o'clock appointment could wait fifteen minutes, even when a man as important as Stephen Jenrick was concerned. Norgil said:

"One hour."

There was pleasure in Caradoc's withery smile. The old professor stepped through to the hallway, beckoning for Norgil to follow.

As he crossed that inner threshold, Norgil the magician embarked upon the strangest hour of his life.

CHAPTER III.

THE JAPANESE BOX.

TO Norgil, the basement room where Professor Caradoc conducted him was quite as fabulous as Ali Baba's cave. It was not stocked with jewels; instead, it contained objects that Norgil regarded as far more priceless—magical apparatus and stage pieces that Norgil had read about, but believed were no longer in existence. All were housed in the one huge room which occupied the entire basement.

There, Norgil saw old-fashioned tables fitted with mechanical devices. He eyed a life-size devil's head that grimaced, and thrust playing cards from its mouth and horns when Caradoc made it operate.

In one corner, Caradoc had a miniature theater, where a curtain rose and a tiny, mechanical magician performed tricks that worked automatically, with other little dolls as its assistants.

Professor Caradoc was pleased at Norgil's interest in these curios from the past. As the visitor examined them, Caradoc recounted their history, stating the ridiculous prices at which he had purchased the various pieces of apparatus.

For forty years, he declared, this collection had been his hobby. He had traveled abroad and had been fortunate enough to pick up many items that would otherwise have been junked as worthless by persons who had inherited them.

It wasn't long, however, before Caradoc tried to draw Norgil's attention to newer paraphernalia of the professor's own invention. It was a wrench for Norgil to drop his interest in the old tricks, but he finally managed it.

Caradoc took him to a square-topped table that had a toy sofa on it. He placed a small doll upon the couch, pressed a button in the table. Mechanism buzzed; the doll rose a few inches in the air and wavered there.

"A genuine levitation!" enthused Caradoc. "Done by electromagnetism! This is only the model. If it were built on a large scale"—he spread his arms with a long sweep—"a living woman could be floated in mid-air!"

NORGIL shook his head.

"It won't work, professor," he declared. "You couldn't hoist a girl half a foot by that system. The lifting power of an electromagnet decreases too rapidly in proportion to distance."

Caradoc looked disappointed. He turned off the motor, beckoned Norgil to the back of the room. The magician viewed an oblong cabinet, set upright, and topped by the shoulders and head of a life-size figure that seemed to emerge from the box itself.

The shoulders were draped with a silken garment, the white throat of the wax image girded by a jeweled necklace. Long, dark hair draped from head to shoulders, while the face itself was partly concealed by a thin, curtainlike veil.

"The Veiled Isis," explained Caradoc. "The figure smiles, moves its eyes, even speaks!"

He lifted the veil to show the waxwork face behind it. The features were exquisitely molded and had a lifelike appearance. Professor Caradoc was ready to start the automaton in operation, when Norgil halted him.

"Too much like the Golem," explained the magician, "an illusion that I used a few years ago and finally put in storage. Sorry, professor."

"But you can open the cabinet," persisted Caradoc, "and show it empty."

"I know," smiled Norgil. "You could do the same with the Golem illusion."

Caradoc opened the cabinet anyway. It wasn't empty as he claimed. Something black jumped out of it, as surprisingly as the white rabbit had popped from Norgil's hat. Norgil gave a quick recoil, then laughed.

THE thing was a black cat that had been asleep in the Isis cabinet. It was a big cat, and playful, once it had been roused. It stood on its hind legs and began to claw at the velvet fringes of a table.

"Stop it, Gandhi!" snapped Caradoc. "You'll overturn things as you did before!"

Gandhi didn't stop until Norgil

coaxed him, by wiggling his fingers near the cat's nose. Thus attracted, Gandhi was lured to a telephone cord in the corner of the room, where he played unmolested.

Professor Caradoc was lifting the top of the Isis cabinet, bringing the veiled bust with it. Norgil stopped him.

"The trick doesn't interest me," he repeated. "Perhaps you have other new ideas——"

"I have!" put in Caradoc. "Back here in the rear of the room."

"But I have an appointment," reminded Norgil. "I'm afraid I shall have to visit you again, professor."

Norgil drew his watch from his pocket. It showed twenty-five minutes to eight; but it had stopped. Norgil suddenly realized the reason. He had been too close to the electromagnet. When he asked Caradoc what time it was, the professor didn't know. He said that he hardly ever bothered about time.

"Call the hotel," he suggested. "Find out what time it is and tell them you might be a little late. Because there is one trick you must see —my Japanese Box."

Norgil picked up the telephone and Caradoc obligingly opened a door and went up a stairway to the second floor, to give Norgil privacy with the call. Norgil dialed the hotel's number, asked for Fritz.

When told that Fritz had not yet come in, or called, he then asked for Miriam's room. But Norgil's pretty assistant did not answer. So he called the desk clerk, learned that the time was seven forty-five and left a message.

"Tell Mr. Jenrick I'll see him after I leave here," declared Norgil.

"But where are you now?" asked the clerk.

"At 529 Walden Street," returned Norgil. "But that doesn't matter. I don't want Mr. Jenrick to come here. Have him wait at the hotel."

The clerk seemed to have trouble getting the message straight, but finally said that he understood. Norgil hung up, set his watch, called upstairs to Caradoc. The professor hurried down, his tight face forming a crackling smile when he learned that Norgil could spare a few more minutes.

CARADOC led the way toward a smaller, stone-walled and dismal section near the rear of the cellar. Once Norgil almost stumbled over Gandhi, the cat. Turning on another light, the professor indicated a box shaped like a massive cube. It measured about four feet in each direction and was one of the oddest boxes that Norgil had ever seen.

Every surface of the box was inlaid with squares, like a chessboard, making a pattern of black and white. Each square measured about three inches across, and near the corners of the box were air holes. From that, Norgil deduced that the box was intended for an escape act.

"A very clever idea," asserted Caradoc, in preliminary praise of his own invention. "You are locked in the box, and then"—he paused to snap his scrawny fingers—"like that, you are out again!"

"It won't do," objected Norgil. "The box looks too tricky. People would say that it was nothing but one of those Japanese puzzle boxes built on a large scale."

Professor Caradoc looked sorrowful.

"That's about all it is," he admitted. "But I never realized it be-

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fore. However, I'll show you how it operates."

He stepped to the box, picked the center square in the top, and gave it a sharp thump with his forefinger. The whole top of the box slid apart in jigsaw fashion.

"Clever," said Norgil. "Still I can't use it."

"Try it just once," urged Caradoc, "from the inside. See how simply it operates."

The old man's tone was so pleading that Norgil decided to humor him. Caradoc fitted the top together like a big slab, while Norgil entered the box and doubled himself inside it. Caradoc settled the lid in place and clamped it tight.

"Ready!" he announced.

Norgil found the center square and pressed it. Nothing happened. His muffled voice came from inside the box, telling Professor Caradoc that the device didn't work.

Caradoc leaned close to an air hole; his tone was a chuckly snarl, as he replied:

"Of course it doesn't work, unless the top is turned over, so that you can press it from within. But I was careful, Norgil—very careful—not to invert the top.

"So you don't like the Japanese Box?" Caradoc's gloat was harsh. "You'll like it less and less, Norgil, the longer you stay inside it—and you will be there for a long, long while."

Laughing with insane glee, Professor Caradoc hopped across the room and pressed the light switch. With a quick glance back into the darkened room, he stepped to the passage and slammed the door behind him.

Again his head tilted as his lips voiced their vicious laugh. Professor Caradoc had outtricked Norgil, the world's best trickster!

CHAPTER IV.

RESCUE REVERSED.

IT was stuffy inside the Japanese Box and Norgil didn't improve the atmosphere with the things he said. He tried strong-arm tactics, too, attempting to wedge the box open by a powerful leverage from his shoulders, a method that had sometimes worked in challenge escapes that he had performed on the stage.

The box-top wouldn't budge. Those clamps made it like a rock. Norgil settled back as comfortably as he could and thought things over.

Professor Caradoc certainly must be a crackpot if he was doing this just to get Jenrick's offer. Jenrick's interest was in Norgil and his name, not Caradoc or any other unknown magician. For the life of him Norgil could not see how the professor had gained this information. Unless——

Something that had happened at the theater suddenly became clear to the magician. He had to act fast now. Whatever Caradoc planned to do, Norgil could spoil it as neatly as the old professor had ruined the afternoon show—provided only that Norgil could get out of the box!

That proviso was a tough one. Norgil was at last satisfied that the only way to open the box was to press the center square on the top. When he poked his finger through one of the air holes, he realized that he had about two feet more to go.

Norgil shoved a pencil through, then gave up the idea. It wouldn't work. That special square required a healthy thump to spring it. Another idea occurred to the imprisoned magician and he started to work on it.

Pulling a large silk handkerchief from his pocket, Norgil pushed it through the air hole, working it along the top of the box. Then, slowly, he pulled in the handkerchief. No results came. Norgil tried an air hole at the side of the box.

This time the handkerchief seemed to catch as he drew it inward. He tried the top again without sucess, so went back to the side process. Maybe the idea was goofy, but Norgil had a hunch that his patient task would eventually be rewarded. He kept on with his alternate procedure.

PERHAPS Professor Caradoc would have enjoyed another laugh had he supposed that Norgil was trying to open that tight-locked box with the aid of a silk handkerchief. But it happened, at that moment, that Caradoc was very busy with a task of his own.

The old wizard was upstairs in another curio room, pulling a box from beneath the telephone table. Inside the box was a phonograph record. Caradoc changed a needle and started the disk in motion. Hooked to a loud-speaker, the record repeated a recent conversation in Norgil's voice.

Norgil hadn't talked to the hotel clerk at all! His dialing of the number had simply started the recording device. The supposed clerk had been Professor Caradoc, replying from an extension phone upstairs. It had been Caradoc who had stated that neither Miriam nor Fritz were in their rooms!

Cocking his head, Caradoc listened intently to the words that came from the record. Near the finish, he stopped the disk at intervals, to make tiny chalk marks. That done, Caradoc pressed a switch that actually connected the telephone with an outside wire.

Caradoc dialed the hotel's number. A clerk answered. The record was already in motion, revolving on a slow ratio. Caradoc settled the needle in place and let Norgil's voice speak for itself.

The clerk heard the first part of the magician's conversation and made replies that Caradoc caught from the telephone receiver. Then came Norgil's later comments, but Caradoc altered them by deft lifts of the needle, that made quick jumps between the chalk marks.

"Tell Mr. Jenrick," announced Norgil's voice, "that I'll . . . see him . . . here."

The clerk inquired where Norgil was. Again the record replied, controlled by Caradoc's maneuvers. It said:

"At 529 Walden Street. . . . I . . . want Mr. Jenrick to come here. . . ."

The needle was up, the record moving soundlessly Caradoc heard the clerk say that he would give the message to Jenrick. The professor let the receiver drop on its hook.

BEHIND the hotel desk, the clerk was jotting down the message when he heard a girl's voice. It was Miriam and she asked about the message, for she had heard the clerk mention Norgil's name. The man let her see it.

"That's odd," remarked Norgil's pretty assistant. "Norgil told me to meet him here. He also said Fritz would be back here, too."

"It is odd, Miss Traymer," agreed the clerk. "Mr. Norgil hesitated when he spoke, as though he was not quite sure what he intended saying."

That was enough for Miriam. She knew that Norgil had gone to look over the old apparatus, and now her chief would need these papers which he had asked her to bring to the hotel. There would be no time to wait for Fritz.

Leaving a note for him, Miriam hurried out.

It was eight o'clock. Jenrick was due any minute, but before the promoter should go to see Norgil, Miriam wanted her boss to have the letters.

The girl took a cab outside the hotel and reached Caradoc's house within ten minutes. She told the driver to wait a short while at the next corner. Groping her way up the dark steps of the professor's home, she rang the doorbell.

She met with no delay. Caradoc was expecting Jenrick, so he opened the door promptly. For a moment, he looked surprised; then, recognizing Miriam as one of the magician's assistants, he invited her into the house. Bolting the door, Caradoc beckoned Miriam through the hallway.

"Mr. Norgil is downstairs," explained the professor in a kindly, disarming tone. "He is looking at some of my marvelous creations. Come—we shall join him."

They reached the cellar. Caradoc opened a door on the right and turned on the light. Miriam eyed a weird device that looked like a figment from some nightmare.

IT was a mummy case with a glass top, set on the horizontal between two frames that held huge knives. The blades looked like mammoth chisels, their sharp edges pointing to slots in the mummy case.

On a table, farther back, stood a dial that looked like a clock face, marked for a five-minute period. It was wired to the frames that held the chisel blades.

"The mummy torture," explained Caradoc. "A girl rests in the mummy case and the dial is started. At the end of five minutes"—he paused, gave a clicking sound with his tongue—"the blades cleave through."

Miriam nodded. She had seen other torture tricks, but none so elaborate as this one. She found herself imbibing some of the enthusism that Norgil felt for new stage illusions. The stunt looked like a sensation. She hoped Norgil would buy it.

Caradoc was eying her keenly. Suppressing a smile, the professor approached the mummy case. It was fixed to a center pivot which enabled him to swing it upward from a head rest, so that the case stood upright. The glass front proved to be a door, which Caradoc opened.

"I'm afraid it's a trifle small," observed the professor. "Wait until I call Norgil here—or better, if you wish to try it——"

Miriam was used to intricate stage illusions; she thought the contrivance was just another deceptive device. She stepped inside, to see if she could fit the mummy case. She did, with ample room to spare. She was smiling as she faced Professor Caradoc, never guessing the surprise move that the stoopy old man intended to produce.

With a quick thrust of his long arm, Caradoc slammed the glass door shut. It clamped automatically. Miriam pounded the glass without a result.

That glass door was unbreakable; the mummy case itself was soundproof!

GLEEFULLY, Caradoc tilted the case to the horizontal, letting its weighted head settle upon the rest provided for it. From within the mummy case, Miriam saw him start the five-minute dial. Caradoc's expression, his eagerness of action were all that Miriam needed to tell her that the dilemma was a real one.

Those cleavers weren't harmless. This device was one that could furnish actual death!

Leaving the light on, so that Miriam's terrified eyes could watch the progress of the dial, Caradoc stepped from the room, pulling the door half shut behind him. He gave a glance across the passage to the other room where Norgil was a prisoner in the Japanese Box.

Rubbing his scrawny hands, Caradoc started upstairs, muttering his thoughts in a whispered chuckle that was a pleasure to his own ears. The theme that he expressed was a simple one.

Soon, Caradoc would deal with Jenrick. After the visitor was gone, Caradoc, too, would depart. Some day, perhaps, the starved body of Norgil would be found in the Japanese Box, and Miriam's remains would be discovered in the mummy case.

The world would think that Norgil had tried some new tricks that didn't work. That, at least, was the conclusion that formed itself in Caradoc's twisted brain. For the present, however, the old professor was satisfied with his latest accomplishment.

CHAPTER V.

CRIME'S CLIMAX.

FOUR minutes and fifty seconds.

Miriam couldn't watch the dial. Hopelessly, she lifted her eyes toward the door of the room. As her gaze fixed, the door swung inward.

Her surge of hope finished with the desolate thought that Professor Caradoc had returned to witness her death. An instant later, Miriam was swept by a new wave of elation as she recognized the figure in the doorway. The arrival wasn't Caradoc.

It was Norgil!

Knowing nothing of the magacian's imprisonment in the Japanese Box, Miriam could readily believe that he had actually arrived. It was impossible, from the tight-cramped space of the glass-topped mummy case, for her to acquaint him with the fact that her death was but a few seconds away.

But Norgil saw that for himself.

Looking first at the mummy case, he spied the menace of the knives, and the glass top gave him a view of Miriam. Norgil saw also how the mummy case had been pivoted to the horizontal. But the vital discovery came when he spotted the moving pointer of the dial, upon the table by the wall.

A second ticked, bringing a jolt of the pointer. Only three more remained. In a flash, Norgil realized that time was insufficient to reach that distant table and break the connection. He picked a closer goal, risking everything on one chance.

Driving forward, Norgil launched himself for the foot of the mummy case and took it with a flying tackle. For an instant, he was between the threatening blades; then, the force of his surge carried him in a long, downward sweep, below their level.

His clutch on the mummy case pivoted it to the upright position, where it stood between the four sets of pointing knives. The case balanced when upright, but that was something that Norgil hadn't learned. He lay on the floor, clinging tightly to the thing during the second and a half that remained.

A click came from the dial. The

cleavers released. Splicing the air, four sets of blades slashed together, finding space instead of the slots in the sides of the mummy case.

Releasing his clutch, Norgil crawled out from beneath the blades. From the mummy case, Miriam met his gaze with a trembling smile. Reaching across the blades, Norgil released the clamps. Miriam pushed the front open until a big blade stopped it. There was just space for her to squeeze out and crawl beneath the knives to join Norgil.

THE girl was shaky when Norgil drew her to her feet. Finding her voice, she gave her story, including the detail that Stephen Jenrick was to arrive soon at this house.

"Don't worry about Jenrick," advised Norgil. "He's smart enough to take care of himself. Smarter, perhaps, than we were. Anyway, we'll be here to see what happens."

They started out through the passage. At the bottom of the stairs leading above, Norgil pointed to the door of the big room where he had been a captive. He told Miriam, "In there I found something that has Caradoc labeled. I know how he'll handle Jenrick. Come upstairs—quietly!"

Caradoc wasn't on the first floor when they arrived there. He had evidently gone up to the second floor. Norgil opened a closet door. Among the props that he saw there was a brace of old dueling pistols. Norgil had them loaded by the time Miriam completed other preparations, at his direction.

A discordant bell echoed through the old house. Footsteps responded from the floor above. Caradoc was going down the front stairs to admit another visitor.

Soon the professor arrived in another curio room on the first floor, conducting Stephen Jenrick. The visitor was a man with heavy-jowled face, lips that were straight like the line of his nose, eyes that were keen and persuasive. He looked about, surprised that he didn't see Norgil. Since the magician was not present, Jenrick let his appraising gaze rest upon the bare-shouldered figure similar to the Veiled Isis, that topped the closed oblong cabinet.

"Norgil has gone," stated Caradoc. "He wanted my advice regarding his proposed business deal with you."

There was a lifting motion of Jenrick's grayish eyebrows. Caradoc understood the silent query.

"You have brought securities valued at fifty thousand dollars," continued Caradoc, "and you expect Norgil to put up ten thousand in cash. At present, he is not in a position to do so. But I would like to buy your securities, allowing you a reasonable profit."

THE proposition interested Jenrick. He produced a sheaf of bonds, spread them for Caradoc's inspection, remarking that all were negotiable. Caradoc made a price:

"Sixty thousand dollars."

Jenrick agreed. The old professor went to a corner, lifted a board in the floor. Burrowing deep, he brought out bundles of currency. Taking the bonds, he handed the money to Jenrick—six packages each containing ten thousand dollars in bills of one-hundred-dollar denomination.

While Jenrick was counting the money, Caradoc heard a sound. He couldn't locate it, but he eyed the closet, suspecting that Gandhi had gone in there. When Caradoc pulled the door wide, his gaze went stiff. On the closet shelf was the waxwork bust of Isis—but its veil was missing!

Before Caradoc could swing, there was a rattle from the oblong box at the end wall of the room. Its door shot open, showing a figure in the cabinet. A bare arm thrust forward, aiming a big dueling pistol. Miriam tossed her head, to throw aside the veil and her loosened hair, as she commanded:

"Stand where you are! Both of you!"

Caradoc recognized both Miriam and the pistol. He knew that the gun contained only one bullet. He faked a cringe. Miriam's aim shifted to Jenrick. Thrusting the bonds in his pocket, Caradoc made a quick spring for the cabinet. His long, clawish hands were free to aim for Miriam's neck. But Caradoc never completed that murderous drive.

A DOOR flew open across the room. Norgil was facing Caradoc from the hallway. The magician was aiming the other dueling pistol. Caradoc stopped short, as helpless as Jenrick.

Just then there was a pounding at the front door. While Miriam kept the men covered, Norgil hurried out and admitted husky-looking Fritz, accompanied by two alert, keen-eyed men who seemed to know the magician by sight. Norgil directed, "All right. I've got them inside."

A moment later handcuffs had been snapped upon both Caradoc and Stephen Jenrick. Norgil helped Miriam from the oblong cabinet. While the girl was slipping her arms into the lowered sleeves of her dress, Norgil indulged in comments.

"You worked your swindle game too long," he told the surprised Jenrick. "Showing that batch of bonds was a smart game to coax a sucker into handing over ten thousand dollars as his share of a phony partnership."

"But——" Jenrick started to protest.

Norgil waved a hand, continued with: "These secret service men"—he indicated the two leanly trim men with Fritz—"informed me of a fake bond racket being pulled on other magicians and show folks. When I started getting your letters, I suspected you were the one behind the racket. So I led you on—and now have your letters, which will send you up for a stretch."

One of the government men put in, "Thanks for leading Jenrick into the trap, Mr. Norgil. But we thought it would be at the hotel. Fritz, however, got your girl's message, telling him to come here." The Fed indicated Professor Caradoc. "I don't get the connection of this man and Jenrick——"

Norgil smiled suavely. "Neither did I—at first." Then he swung on Caradoc. "You had a scheme of your own, professor, and you started to approach me about it. But in my dressing room, you found those letters from Jenrick. So you saw a chance for a bigger clean-up, and got the idea of luring Jenrick here." Norgil shook his head sadly. "But those letters didn't mention that government agents would be on Jenrick's trail. All you knew was that Jenrick was bringing fifty thousand dollars in bonds that you thought could be unloaded.

"You wanted those bonds in order to get real cash, so that you could be far away when you began to pass the counterfeit money that you've been manufacturing here. You figured you'd be out of reach by the time Jenrick began to spend the queer dough that you just paid him for the bonds!"

FOR the first time, Miriam and the others realized the depth of the game; how Norgil had played crook against crook to trap a pair of criminal artists.

Miriam and Fritz saw the Feds haul thousands more of Caradoc's fake money from the cache that the girl pointed out, in the corner of the room. She went with them when Norgil conducted the group below, the prisoners being dragged along.

There, in one corner of the basement, Norgil showed them Caradoc's printing plant—which he had discovered after his escape from the box and just before hearing the professor trapping the girl in the adjoining, smaller room. The press was the discovery that had given the magician a perfect cue to Caradoc's game.

But before they started their departure, Norgil remembered something.

"We'd better bring Gandhi," he remarked. "He deserves some reward for his help."

Amid puzzled looks from the others, Norgil led the way to the Japanese Box. The old contrivancce was standing closed.

"Caradoc bundled me inside there," explained Norgil. "He thought I couldn't get out, because I couldn't reach the center square of the top, to tap it. But the professor forgot Gandhi and left him in the room when he closed the door.

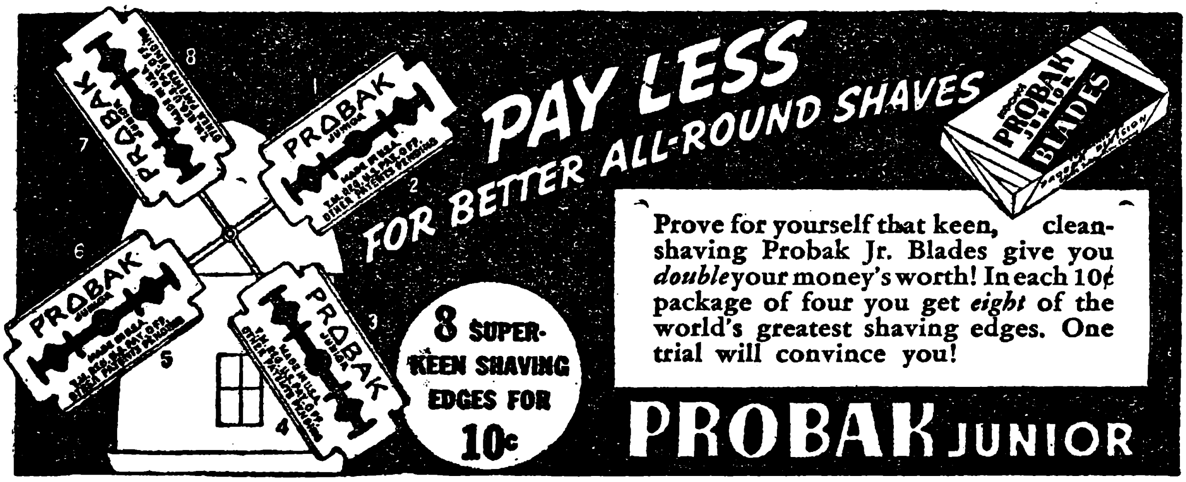
"There was just enough light for Gandhi to see the silk handkerchief that I kept poking from the air holes. Gandhi is playful, and he took the bait. He finally found out that the handkerchief occasionally poked from an air hole in the top, so he jumped on the box—like this."

Compressing the thumb and fingers of one hand, Norgil tapped them along the top of the box, until suddenly they thumped the center square. With a snap, the trick top broke wide. Whipping out his handkerchief, Norgil dangled it in the box, then scooped his other hand inside and brought out the purring form of Gandhi, the black cat.

"I'll take good care of him, professor," promised Norgil, ignoring the fact that Caradoc's scowl was as black as Gandhi's fur. "Perhaps I can use him in the act——"

The magician paused, a smooth smile forming beneath his pointed mustache. Then:

"Yes, I can use Gandhi," he added, "along with the white rabbit that you planted in the wrong man's hat!"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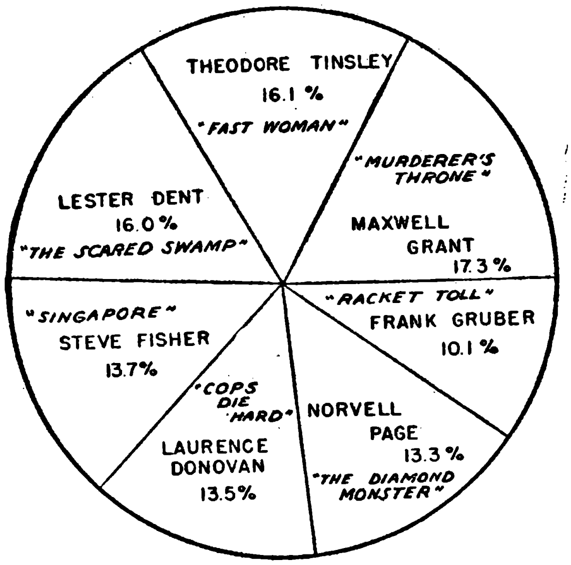
HOW OUR READERS VOTED

Results of Several More Issues Showing Which Stories Were Liked Best

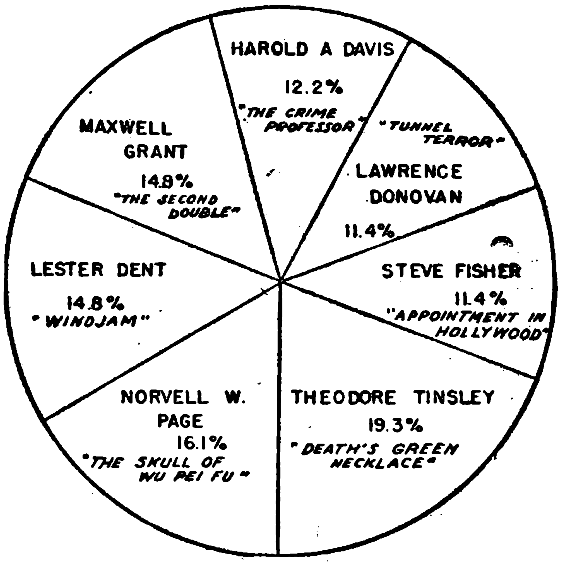
HERE we are with more information as to how our readers listed their choice of stories in the ballot coupons which *Crime Busters* printed in order to get first-hand information as to what the readers like or do not like. To actually go out and ask readers to edit a magazine was rather unusual, to say the least, but the results showed that we were right in taking the readers into our confidence. Every one of you came to our aid splendidly, not only filling out your choice of stories, but also giving additional comments, all of which were appreciated and very helpful. That's why we want you to continue to give us your comments on anything and everything that appears here!

FEBRUARY



The results we give you this month are on the February, March, and April issues. The charts acompanying this give you a graphic picture of the situation, and believe us, it's certainly getting to be some race! No one is sure of his position; no one can rest on his laurels. First-place one month may be third next month, and so on.

MARCH



In the February issue, Maxwell Grant came in first, with Theodore Tinsley, Lester Dent, and Steve

Continued on page 55

A MAN AND A MESS

By Lester Dent

Click Rush is the man, and what a mess he gets into when he tries to learn who Bufa is!

A "Gadget Man" story

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN.

THE hall was long and had a window at one end which looked out against a blank brick wall. The elevators, three, were located about halfway down the hallway. One office door was directly in front of the elevators, and lettering on this said:

CONTINENTAL DETECTIVE
AGENCY
LOS ANGELES BRANCH

Clickell Rush opened this door

and walked in, looking as important as he could.

Rush said, "I want to see the head man."

A man came out of an inner office. He was a wide fellow made of jaw, neck, arms, fists.

"Hello," he said. "I'm the head man around here."

"I'm Clickell Rush," Rush said.

"Well, well."

Rush said, "I want to know the identity of a party who goes by the name of Bufa."

"So you're Clickell Rush," the head man said. "My!"

He took both of Rush's hands and began shaking them heartily, holding the hands tightly. "Get 'im, boys!" the head man called.

Four men came through a doorway. One man tied himself around Rush's legs, two men anchored to Rush's arms, and the fourth man went to the stenographer's desk, got out a rag that looked as if it were used regularly to clean typewriters, and stuffed the rag in Rush's mouth, fastening it there with some adhesive tape of the black, bicycle kind.

Rush honked his rage through his nose. He put forth a succession of body convulsions during which his coat sleeves split over the biceps muscles, and the button flew off his shirt collar at one time when his neck got many sizes larger than normal. The antics got him nowhere.

"Hit 'im with somethin'!" one man croaked finally. "We ain't—gonna —be able—to hold 'im!"

The head man got out a blackjack. "This wasn't part of the bargain," he said. He hit Rush.

Rush stopped struggling. He wasn't senseless, or helpless, or even dazed. He just saw that the sensible thing was to stop struggling.

"The hearse will be around to the back door," the head man said. "We'll take 'im down there."

THEY really put Rush in a hearse. It was a deep cloud-gray hearse with a lining of satin, colored the most depressing blue Rush had ever seen. One man sat on Rush's knees, another sat on his hips and a third on his shoulders. Drapes inside the windows had been pulled together, so no one could see them.

While the hearse rolled swiftly through Los Angeles streets, Rush had time to get an aching in his muscles, and to think. The thing that had happened to him was too astounding to make sensible thinking.

Just to get it straight in his mind, he took a mental review of what had led up to it. He—Rush—was Clickell Rush, inventor of scientific crook-catching gadgets, and hence known as the "Gadget Man." For months, he had been hired by somebody he'd never seen, somebody he knew only as "Bufa," to solve unusual crimes.

Bufa was a voice out of a toad. The toad was artificial, big, and contained a wired-wireless "transceiver" and the voice had always come from another "transceiver" sending from spots unknown—there was no way of tracing a wired-wireless "transceiver" with direction-finders.

Rush had grown very disgusted with being a fantastic kind of detective. When he'd tried to quit, Bufa had forcibly involved him in more unusual crimes. A few days ago, Rush had finally kicked the artificial toad part of Bufa to pieces, and now he was looking for the owner of Bufa's voice.

He'd heard that the Continental Detective Agency, Los Angeles Branch, had supplied Bufa with unusual crimes. Bufa was queer that way. He had apparently hired Rush for no other reason than that he got a great kick out of reading in the newspapers how Rush had solved the crime. Privately, Rush thought Bufa must be crazy. Personally, Rush wanted to find the guy and knock his block off. He'd gone to the Continental Detective Agency to demand Bufa's name.

And here he was. In a hearse. Three men sitting on him.

The boss detective squatted down beside Rush.

"You being the famous Gadget Man," he told Rush, "queer things are nothin' new to you."

Rush almost blew his eyes out trying to say what he thought about the whole thing.

The hearse traveled fast along

boulevards where cars made *zoop!* noises in passing—— Later, there were rolling hills, and the air had the clean smell of country. The tires bumped over chugholes in a dirt road, then the hearse turned sharply right onto a very disused road where grass and short brush kept scraping the underside of the chassis.

"Well, here we are," the driver called.

The hearse stopped.

The head man opened the rear of the hearse and got out. "Stick here," he said. "I'll take a look at the cistern before we put him in."

RUSH lifted his head and saw the man walk to an old wreck of a house which had no windows, and only half a roof. The man stopped in the weeds in front of the house, moved some boards which were lying on the ground, then got down on his knees beside what must be the cistern. When he came back and got in the hearse, he looked pleased.

"The sides are too slick for him to climb out," he said. "And there's only about three feet of water in the bottom."

Rush made a loud, anxious noise around the gag.

The head man bent down and removed Rush's gag. They all waited for Rush to say something, but Rush glared at them without words.

A man asked, "How'll we break his legs?"

"We can run the hearse over 'em," the boss said.

Rush's knees began to knock together, although he had not been looking scared.

"Yonder is a rut we can lay his legs across," a man suggested. "We can hold 'im, while the hearse runs over his legs."

"Ho-hum," the head man said.

"Ho—what?"

The head man opened his mouth, yawned, patted his lips with the back of his right hand.

"Ho-ho-ho-hum," he said. "Guess I didn't get enough sleep——"

Then he lay down on the hearse floor and began snoring.

A man gasped, "What the—the—say—say——"

The three men sitting on Rush dropped their chins on their chests, loosened their bodies, and apparently slept. They rolled off Rush. Each of the four men was as loose as a sack of moles.

Rush rolled around on top of the men, fingers tearing and feeling, until he got a gun off one of them. He rolled with the gun to the rear door and fell out onto the weed-covered ground.

The driver bounded from behind the wheel and came running to see what had happened. He stopped, put his hands as high as he could.

"That's the idea," Rush said.

It was hard to lie on his stomach, twist his head around, and point the gun at the driver while his own wrists were tied together at the small of his back.

The driver strained so to put his arms higher in the air that he trembled.

Rush said, "Knock a window out of the hearse."

The driver pounded one of the glass windows out. Following more orders, he selected a jagged fragment of glass, wedged it upright in the earth, stepped back and held his own hat over his eyes. Rush sawed himself loose on the glass edge.

Rush saw one trousers leg was red, damp below the knee, and pulling it up, found that his knee, where the anæsthetic gas container fitted—the container was molded in sponge rubber and stuck in place with adhesive and was unnoticeable—had been cut when he broke the glass gas cartridge in the container by knocking his knees together, thus releasing the gas that had overcome the private detectives. It was not a deep cut, he learned.

Rush limped over and took a blue revolver, a blackjack and a private detective's badge from the hearse driver. The man was round, his face florid. He looked about as worried as possible, considering how difficult it is for a fat man to look worried.

Rush said, "Go over and lie down in front of the hearse. Put your legs across that rut."

The driver's mouth turned into a round hole with horror all around it. He said, "You—uh—uh——"

"Yeah," Rush said, "you're a good guesser."

The man said, "No—sake don't—" and some more, but the most of what he was trying to say, whatever it was, just came out of his mouth as terrified hisses.

"Then talk me out of it," Rush suggested.

"Why, it's my hearse," the man said in a hasty, frightened voice. "My brother is the head man of the detective agency, and he just asked me if he could use my hearse. So I said, 'What the hell, you're my brother. Why not?' And so we did, on account of my brother didn't have nothing else suitable."

"I see."

"I really didn't want——"

Rush said, "Make me see more."

"I——"

A gun banged. Rush jumped a yard—and no longer had the revolver he had been using to menace the fat man. Because a bullet had knocked the gun out of his hand.

"You get the idea," a woman's voice said, "that Icky can handle a rifle."

CHAPTER II.

THE ANGRY ARTIST.

RUSH stood very still, only turning his head enough to watch Icky come out from behind a bush. Icky was small, twentyish, brunet. Not bad, either—except that she was marring her looks by shoving her lower lip out and up so as to look fierce. Her rifle was a brand-new autoloader that the sporting goods catalogues recommended for elephants.

She said, "Look at the sun!"

"I'm——"

"Look at the sun! Do you want Icky to shoot?"

Rush looked at the sun, pinching his eyes shut tightly, and was completely blinded by sunlight whenever he tried to see anything. He felt the girl's hand search him quickly, and realized that she knew the places where men carried guns.

Next, she searched the hearse driver.

Then she hauled the four men out of the hearse, ordering each one of them to, "Wake up!" in a tone that grew more and more puzzled.

"Now isn't this one for the fools!" she said angrily.

Judging from the sounds, she slapped the men, and expended some useless time kicking them in the ribs and ordering them to get up.

"Well, two will do!" she said finally, and prodded Rush with her rifle muzzle. "This thing will shoot through two men as easy as one," she advised him. "So don't try using your friend for a shield."

"Look, lady," Rush said, "if you will listen——"

"You two join hands and walk down the road!" the girl interrupted.

Rush took the fat man's hand, little-kid fashion. They walked. The fat man's hand was soft, sweating meat. The road was two tracks through the weeds, and when it turned and went behind some trees, there stood a gray roadster with the top down. The roadster was typically Hollywood.

"Rumble seat," the girl said. "Open it."

Rush opened the rumble.

"Get in it," the girl ordered. "Icky is going to lock you both in while she drives."

Rush said, "If you——"

"When you started monkeying with Icky," the girl said belligerently, "you bit off something. She's been watching that Continental Detective Agency all day in hopes of taking one or more of you home with her."

Rush said, "You got me wrong. I'm no Continental detective——"

"I don't think so, either, considering the way you were roughing them around."

"Then——"

"Then you're probably one of the guys they want to hang for murdering the *Pacific Queen's* purser," Icky said. "Get in the rumble seat."

THE fat hearse driver had no consideration. He was big, and at best there was not too much room inside the rumble seat with the lid locked; but if the man had shown consideration and kept himself bunched, it would not have been so bad. Also, dust kept swirling around and choking them, and Icky seemed to pick her road for the bumps.

Rush hated to be crowded, and confused, too. And he was several varieties of confused.

The *Pacific Queen* was that liner which had run on an island reef off the Mexican coast two months ago. Big stuff for the newspapers. Some of the survivors had supposedly brought ashore a few cases of grog, staged a drunk and a mutiny, and scared the other passengers half out of their wits. It was very stinko business. Among the drowned had been the purser.

The point, Rush recalled, was that the *Pacific Queen* purser's drowned body had been washed up on the island. There had been no murder rumors in the newspapers.

The car drummed along, hit bumps with dependable rapidity. The fat man kept groaning, swearing, and crowding Rush; and Rush kept pinching him and the man would snarl.

Rush said, "Well, well, I should have thought of something before."

He took hold of the fat man's throat, and they had a fight which consisted of grunting, straining and bumping themselves against their surroundings. When Rush had the other man's face a satisfactory shade of purple, he let the fellow get a little air down his throat.

"You—you devil!" the man croaked.

"Talk always calms me down," Rush explained.

"All right, damn you," the man said. "Here is what my brother told me. My brother said——"

"You mean your head-man detective brother?"

"Sure. He said you were Clickell Rush, who had a reputation, and you might gum the works if you weren't put out of the way. He suggested we grab you and stick you in a cistern out in the country. He said we wouldn't have had to worry about you, only you work for some nutty party named Bufa——"

"What about Bufa?" Rush snapped.

"Well," the fat man continued, "my brother has been gettin' a hundred dollars for every unusual crime he could dig up and telephone to this Bufa. When these sailors first came to my brother's detective agency with their queer story, he passed it on to Bufa. That was before my brother realized what a big thing it was."

"Big?"

The man became silent.

Rush took the man's throat again, set himself to do squeezing, and while he was doing it, realized the car had made some sharp turns and stopped.

The car stood motionless. There was stillness and strain inside the rumble. The fat man could not move, could not get air, and Rush's fingers clamping his throat made tiny crunching sounds.

"Oh!" the girl's voice said, outside.

Her one word was loud and strange enough that Rush knew something had happened.

Rush stopped choking the fat man and hit the inside of the rumble with his fists, kicked it with his feet.

"Yeo-o-o-w!" he yelled. "Help! Murder! Police!"

The rumble lid opened.

IT had not seemed dark inside the rumble seat, but it must have been very dark, because the sunlight blinded Rush. He felt something gouging him and could not see exactly what it was—but he had a good idea.

A voice said, "Hey, mates! Here's two of your private dicks."

Rush could see enough to be sure it was a revolver muzzle gouging him. The man with the gun said, "Get out, shamus!"

The man was dark and beamy. He wore a sweater, a sailor cap which had seen whiter days.

Rush climbed out of the rumble seat and looked around and saw that four more men, all of whom looked like sailors, were menacing Icky. One of them held the girl's rifle.

Behind the men and Icky stood a white stucco and glass house of spectacular design. Where the house was not stucco, it was glass, and there was more glass than white stucco. The house was not large, but it was unusual enough that probably no one had ever seen it without experiencing an impulse to walk around and around it and just look.

Beyond the house spread the sapphire blue, wave-scratched surface of the Pacific Ocean.

The hearse driver got out of the rumble seat and stood feeling his throat.

The beamy sailor said, "How'd you get stowed in the stern quarters of her car, detectives?"

The hearse driver jabbed both hands at Rush. He yelled, "This guy ain't——"

Rush hit him. Rush was much smaller, much more wiry, and he seemed to jump up to get at the hearse driver's jaw. The driver turned around twice before he spread out on the ground.

"What he started to say," Rush explained, "is that we're not exactly friends any more. You see, the Continental detectives are chiseling. They've started looking out for themselves. They're double-crossing you."

"We figured the wind blew that way," the heavy-set sailor muttered.

Rush looked self-righteous. "Me, I've got ethics," he said. "So if you sailor boys need a private detective, I'm a good bet."

"That's awfully nice of you," one of the sailors said. "You just come in the house, mate, and we'll get you straightened out."

When they entered the house, it was to walk through rooms that were more utterly modernistic than anything Rush had ever seen. The photographic murals on the walls struck him, particularly. Almost every wall was covered with great photographs, some scenic, some symbolic, some fantastic in their modernism. They were amazingly good photographs.

"Room over here where we can talk," the beamy sailor said.

He opened a door, stood back. There was gloom on the other side of the door, and Rush knew it was a mistake to step through; but unfortunately he did not know that until he was inside—and the door crashed shut behind him. He threw himself backward, not turning, but he was not quick enough.

He was locked in a dark room.

He threw out his hands and felt to learn what kind of room he was in, and his hands touched a bottle, which fell on the floor and broke. Instantly, a strong chemical odor flooded up around him.

"Poison gas!" he thought.

But it wasn't. It was one of the chemicals used to develop photographic negatives, and nothing to get excited about. He felt along the door edge, located a switch, thumbed it; and when lights came on, he got down and examined the broken bottle. Enough of the label still stuck to one of the pieces. Yes, it was photographic chemical, and not so disturbing.

The dead man leaning against the wall at the back was considerably more disturbing.

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN AND MATE.

RUSH put off taking his second look at the back of the room as long as there was a reasonable excuse.

The place, he saw, was a photographic darkroom, a chamber fixed up for developing work. The place appeared to be as strong as a vault, with the walls of masonry and the door of steel.

He listened. He heard some harsh laughter outside. Then the girl, Icky, cried out once. There was something about the cry that made Rush feel as if half a dozen cold bugs had gone racing down his spine.

He hit the door. It was steel, not thick steel, but firm enough.

Before he did anything else, Rush made himself examine the dead man. The fellow was gaunt and a little past middle age; he wore a dark uniform with brass buttons. On the breast of the uniform was embroidered the words:

PURSER
S. S. *PACIFIC QUEEN.*

The man's skull had been bashed in with a monkey wrench, and the wrench, gore-stained, lay at the body's feet. The man looked, too, as if he had been beaten a long time before he died.

The body sat on a sandy beach, propped against a palm tree; and in the background, rather dim but nevertheless discernible, was a steamship which had crashed on a reef, and was surrounded by great breaking waves. Rush had seen enough of the newspaper accounts about the wrecking of the *Pacific Queen* to recognize the ship on the reef as that vessel.

The dead man was the most realistic, detailed photograph Rush had ever seen. It was enlarged three feet by four, approximately, but it was still so genuine that it seemed the crimson stains from the smashed skull should go on flowing.

"Whoever made that," Rush muttered, "was something with a camera."

He went back to the door, gave attention to the lock, found the keyhole was large. He pulled a button off his vest and shoved it into the keyhole, the button breaking into fragments inside the lock. He took a second button, this one off his shirt, wet it with his tongue and jammed it into the lock with the vest button.

Rush got back as far as the darkroom permitted and waited, arms over his eyes and face.

The explosion was equal to two or three shotguns letting loose simultaneously. There was some flash, a trifling amount of smoke and flying pieces of what was left of the lock.

The two buttons had been molded of a chemical composition which, when crushed together and dampened, became violently self-explosive.

Rush lowered his arms from his face. A number of bottles of photographic chemicals on the darkroom shelves had been broken. A big enlarger had toppled over, and the top had flipped open.

An automatic pistol had fallen out of the enlarger and lay in a pool of photographic chemical. Rush picked it up, then remembered fingerprints, and tried to wipe it off. He probably succeeded in blurring his fingerprints, but he also got photo dope smeared over the weapon. There were two cartridges left in the clip.

He carried the gun, wrapped in his brown handkerchief, but held so he could fire it if necessary, as he shoved open the wrecked door and stepped out of the darkroom.

The ultra-modern house was full of silence.

He walked to the front door, went out—and stopped with a jerk of astonishment.

He held onto the automatic for an instant, then let it drop.

"Damn!" one of the officers said. "I came within a hair of shooting his insides out!"

"Me, too," the other officer said.

THERE seemed to be only the two men. They were not police officers. They were, according to their uniforms, ship's officers. But their guns were police type.

One officer wore an insignia that said:

CAPTAIN
PACIFIC QUEEN

The other's insignia said:

FIRST MATE
PACIFIC QUEEN

Rush said, "What makes you fellows act like cops?"

They ignored the question.

The captain said, "Something familiar about him, isn't there, Mister?"

"Yes, sir," answered the first mate. "But I can't place him."

"I don't think he was on the *Pacific*

Queen when she piled up," the captain said.

"No, sir."

Rush said, "A fellow named Clickell Rush has had more or less newspaper notoriety from time to time."

"Yes, I read——" The captain stopped, squinted at Rush. "Oh, I see. You're Clickell Rush. The newspaper stories were quite spectacular, as I recall."

Rush said, "Now that we know who we are——" and started to pick up the automatic.

"I wouldn't!" the captain said.

The first mate pushed Rush against the side of the house with the muzzle of his gun, and searched for weapons, then stepped back grimly.

"You see," he said, "we heard a scream and an explosion, and we're rather curious."

The captain pointed in the direction of the reddish tiled roof which was visible over the tops of the trees.

"We live next door, you know," he said. "We have—ah—somewhat more than a neighborly interest in Miss Icky's welfare."

"Who is this Icky?" Rush asked.

"One of the best women photographers in the world," the captain explained. "She does publicity photographs for our steamship line. She is—she happened to be on the *Pacific Queen* when it struck the reef, as you may know."

Rush, exasperated, said, "What I know about this whole thing would go in a gnat's eye, and——"

"Shut up!" the captain growled. "Mister, will you go in the house and see what is wrong."

The first mate entered the house. Rush frowned at the firm way the captain held the revolver pointed at him, then looked around. The girl's roadster was gone, and so were the sailors, the girl and the hearse driver. It was a peaceful seacoast scene, except for the strong odor of photographic chemicals coming out of the house.

Suddenly, the first mate popped out of the door. He had a wild look.

"He killed Joe!" he shouted, and leveled an arm at Rush.

Rush started, said, "What on——"

But they closed in on him, menacing with their guns, and herded him into the house.

"That dead man's only a picture!" Rush said angrily.

But he wasn't. He was a genuine dead man, about sixty years old, who lay on the kitchen floor.

THERE was complete confusion in Rush's mind. Nothing stood out of it except that there was a dead man on the kitchen floor. A man who had been shot at least three times, one of the bullets having been fired after the body had fallen—for the first mate had dug the bullet out of the floor.

The first mate rolled the death bullet around in his palm.

"A .45," he said grimly. "Same caliber as the gun he had when he came out of the front door."

Rush looked everywhere but at the body. "Who is he?"

"Joe—Icky's gardener," the captain growled. "What happened? Did Joe catch you searching the house for the picture?"

"Picture?"

"The picture they're after," the captain said savagely. "Don't be dumb."

Rush said, "Let me show you something," and turned, keeping his hands up, and walked to the darkroom. He nodded at the picture of the dead man sitting against the darkroom rear wall.

"You mean that picture?"

The captain said, "Hell, no; of course not! That's evidence my purser was murdered, is all. We'll use it at the trial after we catch whoever killed the purser. But it's not important. My officers, Icky and myself can all swear on the stand that he was murdered."

"Looks as if he was beaten first," Rush said.

"Sure. Tortured."

"Why?"

The two *Pacific Queen* officers were silent. There was a salty draft through the rooms, and the washing of waves against the foot of the cliff on which the house stood was audible. Somewhere in the near-by trees a bird was singing joyfully.

The captain had been thinking over something, and now he got it off his chest.

"American ships are the most seaworthy ships in the world," he said. "And American officers and sailors are as fine a class as you'll find on any of the oceans. I say that, and I'll stand behind it in spite of any publicity, some of which I suspect is not at all displeasing to alien shipping interests, to the contrary. The *Pacific Queen* went on that reef in a gale, and it was unavoidable. Every passenger was saved—and that was due to the utmost heroism on the part of my crew, and don't think it wasn't—— Now, in that crew, there were a few bad men. A very few. And they were very bad. It was those men who murdered the poor purser because—well, I'm not going to have the mess plastered in the newspapers until we have the truth. So this is all I'm saying."

Rush said, "Let me get this straight. Icky has a picture, and some sailors want it?"

"Some sailors," the captain admitted sourly. "*You* may be working with them."

"The sailors hired private detectives to help them get the picture, evidently," Rush said. "And the detectives thought the picture important enough that they tried to grab it themselves, and to the devil with the sailors."

"We didn't know——"

"What is the picture?" Rush demanded.

They shook their heads stubbornly.

"In that case," Rush said, "it's everybody for himself, kinda."

He was standing in half an inch of photographic chemical—the door had been equipped with a threshold to make it lightproof, and this low dam kept the chemicals in the room.

"This stuff"—Rush pointed at the chemical pool—"may put our eyes out if we get too much of it."

He let this exaggeration soak in.

Then he swiped a foot sidewise through the chemical, knocked the stuff sheeting up over the two officers. They dodged wildly, shielding their eyes.

Rush left.

CHAPTER IV.

PICTURE TRAIL.

GOING through the darkroom door, Rush made a pass at it, knocked it shut. He went on across a living room, through another door, into the kitchen; then on outdoors, banging the door shut behind him, all without more than perceptibly slackening his speed.

The lawn was a cropped modernistic thing—no hedges, no shrubbery. He glued elbows to his ribs, went into sprint stride until he reached brush, low trees and rocks on the seaward side of the house. Once under cover, he changed speed for caution.

He saw the two officers come out of the house.

Rush crept through the brush. A thought having hit him, he turned left and worked toward the house at which the captain had pointed when he said, "We live next door, you know." Reaching more open woodland which was hidden from Icky's modernistic house, Rush ran again, galloped up boldly to the other house.

This one was not at all like Icky's house, being of the old-English country home style, small and rather attractive in a pleasantly homelike way. Rush walked to the front door and glanced through the screen.

He saw a tastefully furnished parlor. A bright Navajo Indian blanket was spread on the floor, and on this lay a baby. The baby looked at Rush, cooed and waved its hands.

Rush punched the doorbell.

Shortly a woman came to the door, a pleasant, attractive and capable-looking woman.

"May I use your telephone?" Rush asked. "I presume you are the cap tain's wife?"

The woman seemed puzzled.

"My husband," she said, "is a real-estate man downtown."

Rush straightened his brown necktie thoughtfully.

"Look," he said, "do you have the captain and first mate of a passenger liner staying here?"

The woman shook her head. "No. Only my husband, myself and the baby live here."

Rush put his hands in his pockets and considered.

"In that case, I guess I won't make that telephone call," he said.

He turned away.

"Just a minute," the woman said.

"Eh?" Rush stopped.

"Is Icky Benson in trouble? I thought I heard some noises over there a few minutes ago, but I was in the bathroom washing the baby's things, and couldn't be sure."

"What makes you ask that?" Rush inquired. "I didn't mention Icky."

The woman eyed him.

"Yes, but Icky said something to me a few days ago about a captain and a first mate of the *Pacific Queen,*" the housewife explained. "Icky said that if I saw the captain or first mate prowling around, I was to call her. She said they meant her no good."

Rush said, "Icky was afraid of them?"

"Yes."

"And they don't live here?"

"No."

Rush walked away rubbing his jaw thoughtfully.

WHEN he was concealed in the brush again, he stopped and gave the little English-style home a long, thoughtful examination; after that there was no doubt in his mind but that this was the house which the captain had meant when he pointed and said, "We live next door, you know." This was the only next-door house; there wasn't another house within eye range.

It was hard to think that the captain had been anything but a liar.

Rush went back toward Icky's house. He did it cautiously, then lay behind a bush and watched the house for a long time without seeing any sign of life.

Then he heard a man sneeze over among the trees to the south. He crept in that direction, and located the captain and the first mate standing behind trees and watching Icky's house. The two mariners were holding their guns in a way that indicated they were eager to shoot somebody.

Their trees stood a little distance apart, so they had to lift their voices to speak to each other; and that, with the direction of the wind, enabled Rush to overhear some of what they said.

"We should've shot him right off the bat!" the first mate grumbled.

"Don't complain, Mister," snapped the captain. "We had to frame all the murders onto somebody."

"All the murders?"

"Yes, Mister," the captain said. "The law has got to have somebody they can prove murdered the purser and Joe. Also Icky Benson and as many of those damned private detectives as we have to get rid of."

"But this Rush wasn't on the *Pacific Queen,* so he couldn't have killed the purser," the first mate objected.

"I can change the passenger list," the captain growled. He laughed harshly. "Why, hell, I rescued him off the liner personally. Don't you remember?"

The first mate chuckled. "Aye, aye, sir," he said. "I remember."

"Then let's get the devil out of here," the captain said.

Rush had a bad ten minutes when he thought they might have a car concealed in the neighborhood, in which case he would have to do something drastic, because he didn't have a way of following a car. But they kept walking, striding along briskly, their guns shoved out of sight in waistbands.

The day was going. The sun stood low on the horizon, with clouds partly in front of it, and long fan-shaped beams of sunlight were shoving through rifts in the clouds. The sea had darkened, and now and then a wave broke in a long white ghost of foam which quickly faded. The air was pleasantly cool and had a tang of brine.

The captain and the mate went down the cliff and got on a boat.

RUSH found the sea to be cold. He was no lover of cold water, and after he was in it, he took time out to give way to a thorough shake. "Blast that Bufa!" he gritted.

He thought of a number of unholy things he hoped to do to Bufa, the voice of the wired-wireless toad, if he ever caught the individual; and that warmed him up somewhat.

Swimming was something he did well, even when it was necessary to do most of it underwater. He came down on the boat from out of the sun, reasoning that men on boats do not stand around looking into the sun. The waves were breaking high, and that helped hide him, but did not help swimming.

The boat had a rusty chain bobstay that ran from the bow water line up to a swordfishing pulpit mounted on a wide, stubby bowsprit. Rush swung up on the bobstay, sat there, and let his clothes leak their water.

Fifty feet would catch the length of the boat, and about fifteen feet its beam. That was wide. It was a squat old hooker which needed paint, varnish and brass polish. An ancient steam yacht which had gone down the nautical grade until it was evidently a party fishing boat. All-day fishing, tackle, your lunch—two dollars.

Rush climbed on deck.

He took a good look first, saw no one in sight, then swung over the iron pipe rail. He sat down at once and took off his shoes, then carried them in his hands, sidled down the deck and went into the first companionway he came to. He found himself in a forecastle, with a pile of anchor rope behind him and plenty of old boat smells in the air.

In front of him was a bulkhead and an open door. Through the door, voices.

Icky was saying, "That is the picture, and that is the spot—right where the purser is standing. Right under his feet."

She sounded like a very terrified girl.

CHAPTER V.

TROUBLE AND ROCKS.

THE captain's voice said, "Do you believe her, Mister?"

"No, sir," said the first mate.

The hearse driver said, "If you guys don't turn me loose, you're gonna wish you had! When my brother, the private detective, finds out——"

There was a blow. The hearse driver croaked in agony.

Icky said wildly, "I tell you, that's the picture."

"We're not convinced," the captain said. "Boys, work on her some more."

There was scuffling, moaning from the girl, and Rush got ready to step through the bulkhead door—but didn't, because they let the girl talk.

"I was with the purser the whole time," Icky said desperately. "He was an old friend of my father's. He told me he knew you and some of the others were after the contents of the ship's safe. He'd overheard you. He wanted me to help him, and I did. We got the passengers' jewels and the money out of the safe. There was a half-million-dollars' worth, at least. We put it in two big suitcases, and got ashore in one of the lifeboats with the passengers. We buried both suitcases at once. It was daylight. The purser wanted a record of where we buried the suitcases. That picture there shows the purser standing over the place where the suitcases, containing half a million from the *Pacific Queen's* safe, are buried."

"You're sure of that?" the captain demanded.

"Just as sure as I am that you went into a blind rage when you learned what the purser had done, and killed him because you couldn't torture the hiding place out of him."

The girl's voice lifted as she continued.

"And the purser moaned something about pictures when he was dying!" she screamed. "So you knew that I had a photographic record of the hiding place. When you got ashore, you hired detectives to try and locate me——"

"We've got to be convinced," the captain said. "Boys, work on her some more. If that water is boiling now, pour some of it in her eyes."

That brought Rush into the cabin.

RUSH entered in a hurry, because it seemed like a time to hurry. He threw a shoe. It hit the face of one sailor who was holding a kettle of boiling water, and he squawked, threw up his arms, and boiling water sheeted over two other sailors, which did no harm.

In the cabin were six sailors, captain, first mate, hearse driver, and Icky. The latter two were tied hand and foot. All guns were in pockets or holsters.

The captain was holding a photograph the size of a sheet of typewriting paper.

One sailor was now slightly stunned, and two a trifle scalded.

Rush had one shoe left. He did

his best to brain the captain with it, missed, and the shoe flew through a porthole and he never saw it again.

Rush made no effort to stay in the cabin. In seconds, he figured, they would begin shooting bullets into him. So he kept going straight for the rear, did what damage he could en route.

He horned a man violently with his doubled elbow. The fellow yelped. He would do more than yelp in a few moments, because there was a hypodermic device molded in sponge rubber and adhering to Rush's elbow. A blow with the elbow would put enough chemical in a man to stupefy him completely in a remarkably short time.

Rush kept going. He grabbed a life preserver, and sloughed the first mate with it, knocking the man backward into another sailor. Rush held onto the life preserver.

Rush scooped up Icky, still keeping the life preserver. He kept going. Somehow, in passing the galley, he collected a butcher knife. Out on deck, he plunged.

He had stormed the length of the cabin in not much more than ten seconds.

He slashed, got the girl's wrist ropes apart. He jammed the life preserver in her hands.

"Under stern!" he hissed.

He shoved her overboard.

He went down, doubling, tearing at his necktie. He got it off, wadded it, and jammed it into the "Charlie Noble"—the name sailors applied, no telling why, to the stovepipe which comes up through the deck. The stovepipe was hot and smoking, for they'd had a fire to heat the boiling water.

Toward the bows, Rush went. He still had the butcher knife. He shot forward, stomach-down, and slid the last dozen feet. Not because he wanted to be spectacular, or liked splinters, but because the men were out of the cabin now, and had started shooting.

He chopped with the butcher knife, got the anchor rope apart.

"Help!" the hearse driver was bellowing. "Get me away from 'em!"

The waves began tossing the boat toward the rock-fanged shore.

Rush slid down the forecastle hatch, back into the boat. All the men were out on deck, swearing and running.

"He dived overboard!" a man yelled. "I heard the splash."

Not wanting them to look overside and find the girl, Rush dived forward into the cabin. He swooped on the hearse driver, the butcher knife held ready to cut the man loose.

The hearse driver misunderstood the purpose of the poised butcher knife.

His scream of terror must have been heard in Los Angeles.

UP on deck, the men boiled back toward the cabin companion. Rush sawed at the hearse driver's ropes with the butcher knife. It seemed to him that the butcher knife was the dullest thing he had ever handled. But he got the hearse driver free.

"Gosh!" The driver started to get up, croaked, "I thought——"

Rush shoved him back.

"Ps-s-t!" Rush said. "Take 'em by surprise."

Rush then jumped for a dark hole. He landed below, in the engine room. Tools stuck in mountings on the wall, and he began picking out hammers and wrenches, the heavier ones, for ammunition.

Just then, the necktie let loose in the stove. It made a sound that might have been a firecracker which had fizzled.

The necktie was supposed to do better than that. The lining was saturated with a combination of explosive and one of the chemical materials designated under the common heading of tear gas. But then, the necktie was wet.

Men were down in the cabin now. Rush threw a hammer. He threw it at a man's head. The hammer was heavy, and he couldn't tell how hard to throw it and merely stun, so he took no chances and threw hard enough to remove doubt. The victim dropped.

The hearse driver reached, got himself a leg, and went into action.

Rush missed with two wrenches. He hated that, because they were his two biggest wrenches. Then two men began shooting down into the engine room at him, and he got behind the engine.

The boat hit the rocks. She lifted high, and seemed to jump onto the rock. The crash was terrific. Then the boat rolled over on her side.

Rush lunged to the companion. Sure enough, the two who had been shooting at him were down on the floor. The striking of the boat had upset them. They scrambled around. The gas from the stove was making them cry.

Reaching up, Rush tapped one's skull with a wrench. Then he hit the other in the face, throwing the wrench. He followed up, landed a fist on the fellow's jaw.

The hearse driver got his foe by the ears about then, and hammered the man's head on a bulkhead until he was limp.

"Out!" Rush yelled. "That gas!"

His own eyes began smarting. But they did not smart enough to prevent him finding the captain, and taking the picture which was the cause of everything.

Out on deck, the air was clear. But the waves were lifting the boat and slamming it onto the rocks. The craft was close in now—in fact, the bow was jammed high on the beach.

"Icky—you all right?" Rush yelled.

Icky came out from behind a big boulder on shore.

"Save that picture!" she screamed.

Rush dashed into the cabin, got a sailor by the collar, dragged him to the bow, hit him with a monkey wrench to insure his remaining unconscious, and threw him off on shore.

He repeated the carry-out-knock-senseless-throw-ashore procedure until he had unloaded the old boat.

The hearse driver fell off the bow onto the beach without assistance.

"Now," Rush said, "we call the police."

"We call my brother," the hearse driver said.

"No," Rush said. "We call the police——"

The hearse driver drew a big revolver which he must have taken off one of the sailors.

"We call my brother!" he said.

CHAPTER VI.

TOAD EGG.

CLICKELL RUSH was—he still thought so—more of an inventor than a detective. As an inventor, he had imagination. The two things held hands, as it were, for it was necessary to have imagination to be an inventor.

Imagination or no imagination, Rush considered the saga of himself and Bufa—the toad with the wired-wireless voice—to be nothing if not fantastic. If anybody had told him the story offhand, he knew very well he would not have believed it.

So he hated to tell the story. But sometimes he had to tell it, and when he did, he always finished warm under the collar, and saying, "Now don't start telling me how whacky it sounds!"

At nine o'clock that night, he was looking around hotly and saying, "Now don't start telling me how whacky it sounds!"

The head-man private detective, and his brother the hearse driver, nodded solemnly.

A dozen or more other private detectives, and some policemen also nodded profoundly.

Rush was astounded.

"You believe me!" he said weakly.

The head-man private detective nodded. "Sure. I been getting one hundred dollars for every unusual crime I could notify this Bufa about. I don't know who Bufa is, or anything, except I found a crate of carrier pigeons on my lawn one day, and orders to tie notes about unusual crimes to a bird's leg and turn it loose. I did that. Every time the crime was good, I'd get a hundred-dollar bill."

Rush said, "I don't wish any man bad luck, but I hope you never make any more of that money."

All the private detectives grinned.

"The hell with Bufa," the head man said. "We're set. When them sailors came to me with the story about the picture, and wanted me to find the girl and get the picture, I unluckily first notified Bufa, then got to thinking, and knew the sailors were crooks. I went to the steamship company, and they said if I would trap the sailors and get the goods on 'em, I would get all the steamship company business. And boy, that steamship company business is a plum."

The head man got up, scowled at Rush, said, "I didn't want you solving it and glomming the gravy. I was sure sorry I notified Bufa for a measly hundred bucks. So all we could do was grab you, and keep you off the job until we did our stuff. And by the way, we didn't exactly mean that about breaking your legs. We was kinda buildin' up a scare to keep you in that cistern until we trapped the sailors. Just forget it, see?"

"I won't forget it!" Rush yelled angrily. "I've got a notion to take a chair to the whole crowd——"

"Pipe down!" a policeman ordered.

Icky got up and said angrily, "Detective, why didn't you tell me this in the first place?"

The head-man detective snorted. "You didn't turn the picture over to the steamship line. I figured you a crook."

"Crook!" Icky shrieked irately. "Those sailors watched the steamship line's offices! I was even afraid they had the telephones tapped!"

"Don't yell at me!" the detective said.

"I'll yell all——"

"Pipe down, lady," another policeman said.

Rush said, "We're orphans, Icky. Nobody loves us."

"Ain't that the truth!" Icky snapped. "A bunch of bloodthirsty sailors chase me, murder my gardener, kidnap me——"

"They're in jail, ain't they?" the policeman interrupted. "Pipe down, lady."

"Orphans is right!" Icky said.

"Let's blow," Rush suggested.

They blew.

THEY rode a taxicab up the street that led from the police station, and when they had covered half a dozen blocks, Rush remembered something, unbuttoned his shirt.

He took out the picture, which had been tucked inside his shirt.

"Look what I forgot," he said.

They looked at the picture. It was a photograph of an island shore, some rocks, a few trees, the *Pacific Queen* on a reef in the background, and the purser of the ship standing in the foreground.

"Treasure map," Rush said.

"Yeah," Icky said. "I guess we better turn it over to the steamship company, so they'll know where to dig for the contents of the *Pacific Queen's* safe."

Rush nodded. "That straightens everything out. Captain, first mate and sailors were crooks. Private detectives were honest, but glory-hogging. That leaves the two innocent bystanders—you and me."

Icky eyed him. "You sound," she said, "as if you were leading up to something."

Rush grinned. "Dinner for the innocent bystanders. How about it?"

"Swell," Icky said.

Rush thought it was swell, too, and began to believe California might not be so bad.

He was thinking how swell California might be when he walked into his hotel room—he had come to dress for the evening—and saw the toad sitting on the table. It was about a suitcase full of toad, river-mud-yellow underneath, a bad shade of green on top, with warts. It sat with the lighted table lamp close to its gaping mouth. An electric-light cord leading from it was plugged into a wall socket.

Bufa, the toad, was back.

Rush ran over, lifted the toad, looked under it. Sure enough, there was a bank note underneath—a bank note for ten thousand dollars. The ten thousand was Bufa's accustomed payment when Rush had solved a case.

Rush found it hard to eye ten thousand dollars, and still look mad.

"Oh, boy—aren't we happy to see each other!" the toad said unexpectedly.

Rush strode to the window and looked out and saw thousands of lighted windows of Los Angeles spread before him. From any one of many of them, the voice of Bufa the toad might have been watching with binoculars.

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TONG WAR

CHAPTER I.

SUBSTITUTE.

"THE doctor is with him now," the conductor said. "It's his heart again."

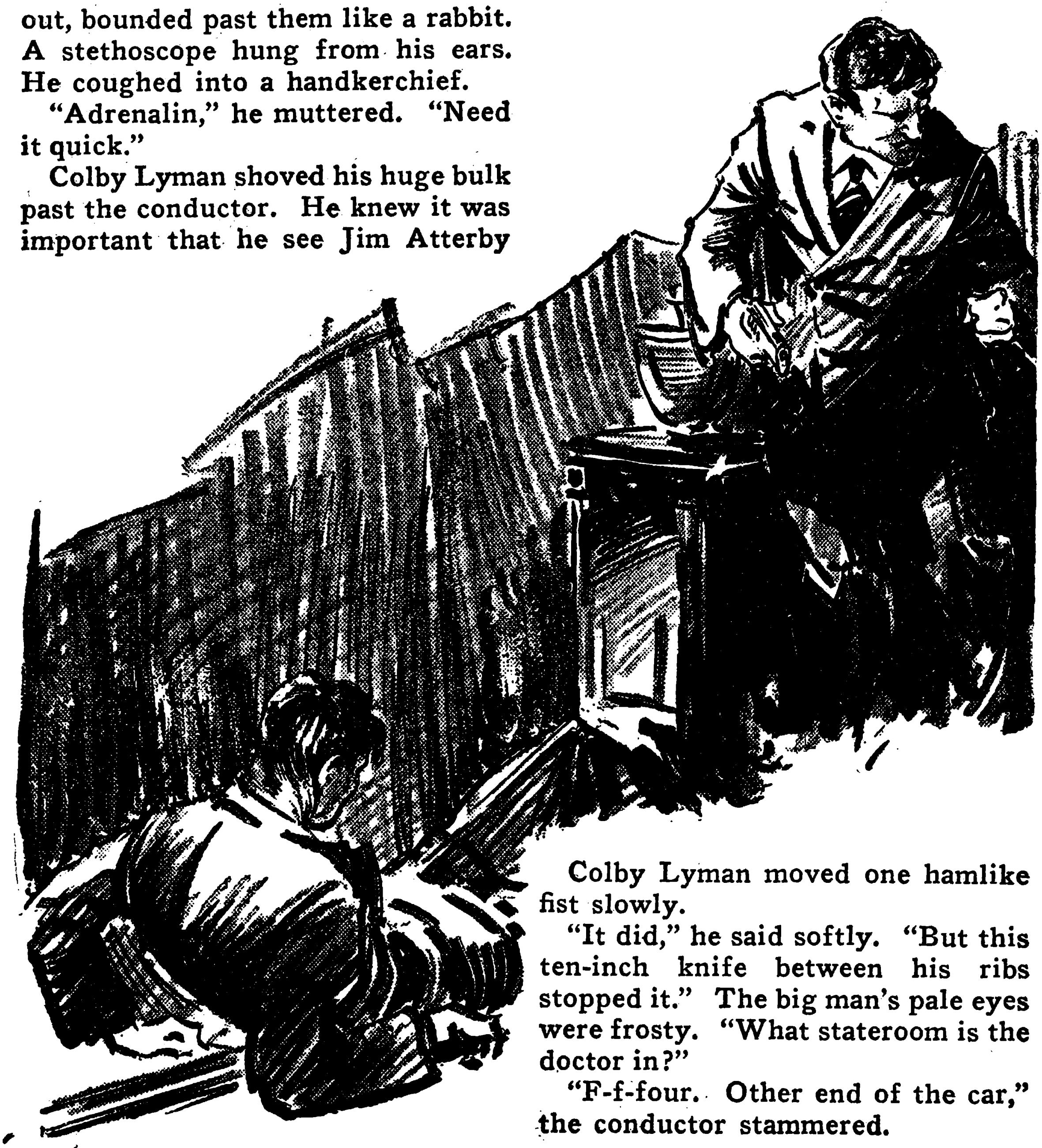
A door snapped open as the two men crowded down the narrow passage toward the de luxe stateroom of the limited. A small man rushed out, bounded past them like a rabbit. A stethoscope hung from his ears. He coughed into a handkerchief.

"Adrenalin," he muttered. "Need it quick."

Colby Lyman shoved his huge bulk past the conductor. He knew it was important that he see Jim Atterby alive. Other lives depended upon it. Atterby had said so. Colby thrust into the stateroom.

The old man in the wheel chair was almost as huge of girth as Colby Lyman. His eyes were glazed. Colby knew, as he leaned over, that Jim Atterby was dead.

"H-h-heart must have quit on him," the conductor stuttered.



Colby Lyman moved one hamlike fist slowly.

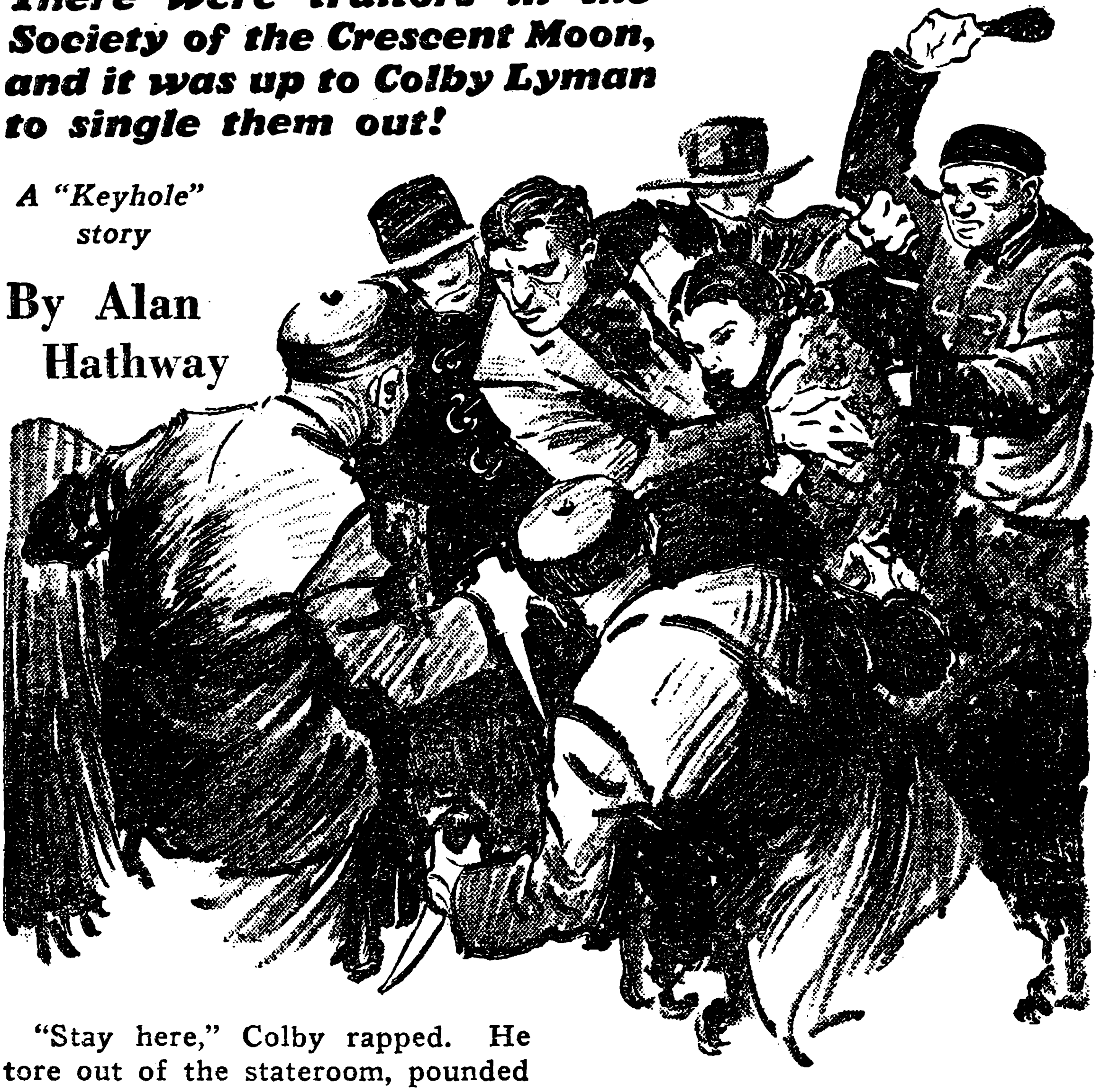
"It did," he said softly. "But this ten-inch knife between his ribs stopped it." The big man's pale eyes were frosty. "What stateroom is the doctor in?"

"F-f-four. Other end of the car," the conductor stammered.

There were traitors in the Society of the Crescent Moon, and it was up to Colby Lyman to single them out!

A "Keyhole" story

By Alan Hathway



"Stay here," Colby rapped. He tore out of the stateroom, pounded down the corridor between the rows of berths. A Negro porter rolled his eyes whitely and got out of the way. It was a natural move. Colby weighed three hundred pounds, and none of it was fat.

The door to compartment No. 4 was locked. Colby hit it running. The light metal portal bent, and the lock snapped. On the second plunge of Colby's shoulders, it swung open. The only man in the compartment was on the floor. His hands and feet were tied, and there was a gag in his mouth.

When Colby got it out, the man spluttered that he was Doctor Henry Smythe. He said a stranger had overpowered him right after Jim Atterby had sent for him. Atterby had known the doctor was traveling on the train, but they hadn't met. The stranger had taken the doctor's bag and answered the call.

Colby Lyman looked at the doctor's credentials. Then he looked at his hands.

"Anyway," he said, "you aren't the man who came out of Atterby's stateroom. You haven't a mole on your right thumb."

COLBY stamped back to the de luxe room at the other end of the car. The limited was swaying with motion now. In ten more minutes it would be in Redwood City's palatial central terminal. Colby Lyman had met the train in the suburbs because he wanted to talk to Jim Atterby before any one else in Redwood City. In Colby's pocket there was a telegram addressed to Harold Jenkins, owner of the Redwood City *Index*.

"A plot is under way to kill three men including myself," the wire stated. "If that happens, other lives will be sacrificed. I shall bring a message."

It was signed Atterby. Jim Atterby was an old friend of Jenkins.

Colby Lyman strode past the conductor to the corpse. He extended a pudgy thumb and calmly gouged out the right eye of the dead man. The conductor gasped.

"Glass," Colby said. "Not many persons knew it." He began to unroll a strip of India paper concealed within the artificial optic. It was the message to Harold Jenkins. The note read:

> I am sponsoring two important Chinese officials. They have been years in governmental service in China. They are at present incognito in Redwood City, because their lives are in danger. They have come to raise funds to rehabilitate their countrymen made homeless by war and floods. Powerful influences are working to thwart this aim. Two important tongs are involved. If I do not get to Redwood City to formally introduce them at the Dragon Festival, take care of them for me. Their names are Chang Kuo Fei and Jung P'u Li.

Colby Lyman looked thoughtfully into a mirror for a moment. Then he began to change clothes with the dead man. The conductor protested, and Colby handed him a letter. The conductor stopped protesting. It was a statement from the president of the railroad, stating that the bearer was to be permitted to do anything he wished to do.

THE president of the railroad didn't know Colby Lyman, eccentric linotype operator on the *Index*, and who was also a deputy sheriff in his spare time. Neither had Jim Atterby. There was only one person in Redwood City who knew that Colby Lyman was actually the columnist known as "The Keyhole." It was The Keyhole who had laid a lot of crime in the city by the heels and hung it out to dry.

Colby put on Atterby's clothing and pulled a slim grease pencil from a pocket of his own suit. A few quick strokes put lines of age into his cheeks. He adjusted a small black button under his shirt collar, pulled a fedora well down over his eyes. A muffler around his throat covered the lower half of his face.

Colby knew he would have to find Chang Kuo Fei and Jung P'u Li in Redwood City. But first, he wanted to see who might meet Jim Atterby at the central station. The Keyhole knew about the two visiting dignitaries. Their mission had been closely guarded by authorities in China. Their credentials, copies of their signatures and letters of credit had been sent on to the local banks ahead of them.

Their departure from China had coincided with a wave of murder five thousand miles away in Redwood City. Colby knew that fear stalked Chinatown—the Chinatown which should have been carefree and gay at the time of the Dragon Festival. Eight upright and honorable Chinese had been murdered for no apparent reason. All were men recently returned from China, and interested in the cause the two officials sponsored.

A deadly tong war was the whispered prophecy of those who said they knew. It was whispered that white men would die, too, before blood stopped flowing. It was to be a tong war to set an all-time record for needless murder. And it was somehow tied to the knifing of old Jim Atterby, a philanthropist all his life. The Keyhole wanted to look through the eyes of the dead man. He might be able to see why he had been killed.

The Keyhole's eyes were narrow as he was wheeled into the granite and marble station. He instructed the redcap to stop in the center of the promenade. His jaws worked rhythmically on a wooden match stick. That operation always seemed to speed his thinking processes.

The Keyhole surveyed the crowd and wondered who would rise to the bait he had made of himself. The columnist had used himself as bait before. Sometimes he caught a fish. On other occasions, the sharks had almost gotten the bait.

HE saw only four persons whom he thought concerned him. Two of them walked quickly to greet the muffled figure in the wheel chair.

One was tall, bushy-haired, with a pinkish complexion. He was Morton Starson, an industrialist who made a hobby of organizing charitable enterprises. The other was a diminutive Chinese who seemed constantly on the verge of shaking hands with himself. Among other things, he was secretary of the Crescent Moon Tong, one of the two strongest societies in Chinatown. His name was Ling Su.

Starson was the first to speak.

"Welcome back home, Mr. Atterby," he said. "You have been too long in China. We need your efforts here."

"The Keyhole"

Ling Su bowed and bobbed his head up and down.

"Your good deeds have sped before you," he intoned. "They need not my telling to become famous." He paused. "Consider yourself my master. I am here to serve you."

Colby Lyman coughed.

"It is a wise man who can recognize his master," he replied.

The Chinese straightened suddenly. His black eyes seemed to snap. But The Keyhole was not looking at Ling Su. He saw two other figures lurking near the edge of the crowd. Apparently, they had come to see Jim Atterby, but not to meet him. Perhaps to see his body taken from the train.

One was a beetle-browed, wide-jawed white man known as "Mitters" Skean. Beside him slouched a squat Oriental. He was Johnny Wu, leader of the Golden Serpent Tong. He had recently returned from China. Colby knew that the two visiting Chinese dignitaries were being sponsored by the Crescent Moon Tong. There was jealousy between the two groups, frequently of a murderous nature.

Mitters Skean, the white man, was a gambler. Every Chinese dollar the two visitors might take for their cause meant a dollar that Mitters Skean couldn't get through fan-tan or the lottery. The Keyhole knew about that. Skean was a close friend of Johnny Wu.

Colby turned to the two men who had met him. "You two ride in the procession," he directed. "I shall be in the reviewing stand—alone."

The Keyhole expected shooting. And he figured the miraculously escaped Jim Atterby would be a very logical target.

CHAPTER II.

DEATH TRAP.

LOTUS STREET was packed. Silently. There was an atmosphere of tensity, of fear. It was as if the onlookers believed the gaudy dragon of the Crescent Moon Tong was real, not a grotesquery of papier-mâché. The Keyhole climbed to the wooden reviewing stand as the dragon started cavorting down the street.

Behind the dragon, there were two automobiles. Diminutive Ling Su rode in the first one. Morton Starson was in the rear seat of the second. On each side of him sat an ascetic-appearing Oriental. The Keyhole knew they were the two honored visitors. Then he saw Johnny Wu.

The squat Chinese suddenly spat out a curse. Slowly, a flat automatic appeared from the wide sleeves of his robe. Colby Lyman pulled a match stick from between his teeth and began to yell. The yell was cut off. Two things happened quickly.

The automatic began spitting flame and lead. At that instant, the planking in the platform gave way beneath Colby Lyman. His huge figure hurtled through the hole, disappeared. Bunting hung from the platform right down to the pavement.

The Keyhole saw the flash of a knife as he plunged downward. Half a dozen dark figures rushed toward him. The nearest one suddenly found himself horizontal in the air. He landed feet-first in the face of another. A third got a fist in the jaw. The jaw shattered. A fourth gangster decided he shouldn't have come. So he left.

The remaining two killers, both white gangsters, whipped out automatics. One roared, and lead tore through the flesh of Colby Lyman's shoulder. His huge hands slapped out; each caught a gangster's neck. Two thick skulls cracked together like tenpins in a bowling alley.

The Keyhole tore out of a slit in the bunting at the rear of the platform. He found himself in a narrow alley. Staccato shots rapped from Lotus Street. Women screamed and men cursed. Colby knew the threatened tong war had begun. And he also knew it was more than that. White gangsters do not fight in a tong war.

Suddenly, a knife whizzed through the air, smacked into a wooden upright beside Colby's head. The vibrating handle thudded against the muscles of his neck. Then a bludgeon rocked against his skull. The Keyhole twisted, grappled with his assailant. The alley swarmed with dark, scurrying figures.

Then, like Gulliver overcome by the Lilliputians, Colby Lyman sank slowly to the ground. Skillful hands knotted stout silken cords about his arms. The club slammed again on his skull.

COLBY LYMAN was not entirely unconscious. Dimly, his brain kept account of the turnings taken by his captors. The passageway was dark. But the room into which he was carried was an inkpot with the lid on. Then a dim red light came on. Colby saw sets of thumbscrews. He saw two wire loops attached to the ceiling. A man could hang by his thumbs from those things.

There were a dozen men in the room. All wore masks that completely hid their features. One wore a hood that showed only slitted eyes. He spoke, his voice muffled by the heavy hood that he wore.

"If you talk glibly," he said, "we may let you die quickly. Who are you, and what do you know about this tong war?"

The hooded one jerked his head. A stooped Chinese hauled a queer bamboo chassis from a corner. It was shaped like the framework of a huge barrel. Leather thongs were on either side. It was caked with dried blood. The bottom was equipped with a large catch-basin.

Colby met the hooded one's eyes. His own eyes narrowed, gave stare for stare. Behind the hooded man, in a doorway, crouched two masked thugs. Submachine guns were pointed at Colby.

"Speak, fool," the hooded one rasped. He pointed at the blood-caked contrivance. "The flesh comes off in strips. It is not pleasant."

The Keyhole grunted, worked at his bonds. But he knew that two machine guns would mow him down before he could get very far.

"Quite a place you've got here," he said flatly. "I didn't know there were torture chambers under Vine Alley. Only four doors from Lotus Street, too. It's a nice handy place to be killed. Go ahead, get it over with."

The masked one snarled. His eyes blazed with rage.

"It won't be a quick death," he snapped. "Your flesh will go, a strip at a time. Until you talk."

He jerked a thumb at two masked Orientals.

"Take him to the rack," he ordered. "We'll try a little slicing."

THE killers leaped forward. Colby shot out a foot, tripped the first one. The second one stumbled. That delayed them. Not much. But it did take time. Colby worked frantically at the cords around his wrists.

The two thugs climbed to their feet. One whipped out a knife, slashed at Colby's throat. The big printer dodged, seemed to lose his footing. At that instant, a cry went up from beyond the guarded door. A dozen shots roared out. Axes pounded on a door far up above.

"The cops," a voice screamed. "There's a hundred of 'em."

The men in the room whirled toward the door. For a moment, they forgot their prisoner. None of them saw Colby Lyman lunge across the room. He was like a bull rhinoceros gone berserk. His hands were free now. The nearest guard with the Tommy gun turned a fraction of a second too late. A fist smashed into the base of his skull. The vertebræ snapped. The second one turned. Colby twisted the Tommy gun from his hand as if it were a pencil in the hands of a schoolboy.

Axes crashed through the door above. Feet pounded down a dark hallway. The man in the hood screamed, leaped toward a switch. The room was plunged into a tomblike darkness.

Colby Lyman did not shoot. Catfooted, he crept across the room, followed the sound of retreating footsteps. He was sure they would show the way to another exit. And he did not want the police to find him here. If they did, they would know Colby Lyman's identity. For they had been summoned by The Keyhole!

CHAPTER III.

STRANGERS IN CHINATOWN.

WHEN Colby reached the alley, he hid the Tommy gun. Then he strode out onto Lotus Street. There were cops everywhere. Chinatown was in a virtual state of siege. "Red Mike" Kimmer, mayor of the city, strode through the street, directing the police.

Red Mike would have been framed for murder when he was running for mayor if it had not been for The Keyhole. He did not know who The Keyhole was. But he had offered to help the mysterious enemy of crime in any way that he could. The Keyhole had arranged to get messages to Red Mike. Frequently, he tipped off the mayor when speed was necessary to catch a crook. Sometimes, a printed paragraph might give a crook the chance to flee.

Red Mike had a special wavelength radio in his office. An assistant was always within hearing. Colby Lyman wore a little black button under the collar of his shirt. It was really a "throat microphone," similar to the type being tried out on the major air lines for pilots. When he turned it on, the radio in Red Mike's office jumped to life. No one watching Colby Lyman would have any reason to suspect he was doing more than talking to himself.

Colby Lyman suddenly darted into a shadowy doorway on Lotus Street. Two familiar figures were approaching hurriedly. They were the two visitors from China.

The Keyhole gave them only a passing glance. They talked excitedly in singsong Chinese. The Keyhole did not understand the Oriental tongue, though he knew much of it. He idly thought they were using all nine tonal qualities of southern Cantonese. But his eyes were on the figure of Mitters Skean, who was furtively trailing behind them.

Colby could have grabbed Mitters Skean. He could have demanded an explanation. But he wasn't ready for questions yet. He wanted first to find out what was behind a tong war, that he was sure had been caused by the greed of a white man. He tripped Skean as the gambler passed. Skean cursed and yelled. The excitement caused the two Chinese to run. Colby figured their destination was the clubroom of the Society of the Crescent Moon. He held Mitters Skean until they got safely there.

Then Colby Lyman drifted out of sight and toward the *Index* office. He expected he would have a visitor. As it turned out, he had more than he expected.

THE first visitor was a girl. She was there when The Keyhole arrived. She was a smallish girl. Diminutive, as a Chinese girl should be. Her eyes were wide with terror. She was very pretty, and dressed in smart American clothes.

She sat in a chair in the center of a queer room. From where she sat, she could see two dozen other girls, exact images of herself. There was only one other thing she could see. That was the door through which she had come. The room was like a mirror maze in an amusement park. Only more so.

Colby Lyman surveyed her from another room. He looked into a different set of mirrors. The girl could not see him. She was in a room that any one could get into. The Keyhole used it to permit people to interview him, yet without actually seeing to whom they were talking. He learned of news that way, sometimes. Other times people came who needed help. Or who wanted to kill him.

Colby had first tried an Argus mirror to separate his own sanctum from the visitors' room. But that had permitted only one-way vision. And a couple of machine guns had shot it away. The slugs had almost finished The Keyhole.* This set-up was more efficient. And more confusing, if the visitors tried to get rough.

"You are Jenny Bon Char," The Keyhole said. "How can I help you?"

The girl's dark eyes lighted.

"My father has not killed any one," she said simply. "I am afraid that he will. If I knew what was behind this tong war, I might be able to stop him."

Colby Lyman knew that her father was Johnny Wu, the leader of the Golden Serpent Tong.

"If I knew, I could probably stop him myself," The Keyhole said. "It is up to you to find out. That way, you can help him."

BEFORE the girl could answer, the door of the inner sanctum opened behind The Keyhole. Colby Lyman turned, saw the slight form of Ling Su standing in the doorway. Colby jerked a thumb toward the room of mirrors, where the girl who could not see him was talking.

"Jenny," he said. "You see her."

Ling Su disappeared. In another minute, he was in the room of mirrors with the girl. His arms went around her.

"Jenny," he said softly. "If it were not for these tong hatreds, we could be married. We must find a way to end them."

Colby Lyman knew that Ling Su was right. The bitterness between the two tongs was so great, Johnny Wu would have killed his daughter rather than see her the mate of Ling Su. Colby Lyman spoke.

"Go to your father," he said. "Tell him that both the police and The Keyhole will aid him if he will give himself up. He has not yet killed any one. Fortunately, his aim today was poor. Tell him The Keyhole believes he is being misled by some one. He would not like to kill if he were wrong in his reasons for doing it."

The Keyhole was thinking of Mitters Skean as he spoke. He wasn't sure that he was right. But he knew Mitters Skean had gambling connections with the Chinese throughout the country. It might be worth millions to him to get the two visitors out of the way. Or he might really be the good friend of Johnny Wu that he was supposed to be. He saw Ling Su whisper to the girl. She nodded, squeezed the hands of the dapper Chinese and went out.

Ling Su came back to the sanctum.

"You have been good, Mr. Jenkins," he said softly. "I hope the animal in the trap does not bite the hand of its rescuer."

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* See "Box Seat To Blackmail," published in the January, 1938, issue of CRIME BUSTERS Magazine.

LING SU did not spend all his time as secretary of the Society of the Crescent Moon. He was valet to Harold Jenkins, Jr., and more than a servant. He was a loyal friend. He was the only one who knew of the triple identity. He knew that Harold Jenkins, Sr., had been murdered by politically powerful gangsters in a distant city; that the son had dedicated the fortune that was left him to stamping out crime. Ling Su knew that because his own father had served the Jenkins family since the days when Orientals were first imported into California.

"The guests of honor escaped, master," he said. "Also Mr. Starson, who is aiding in gaining contributions from Americans to their cause. Johnny Wu was struck from behind before he did damage. He staggered into an alley. When the police arrived, he had gone. He——"

An angry curse, the slamming of a door interrupted him. Four masked gangsters crowded into the room of mirrors. They advanced to the center, to the chair where Jenny Bon Char had been sitting. Two held machine guns. The others had queer-looking weapons of heavy caliber. One of the latter began to talk. He had a big nose that stuck out under his mask.

"We heard it was you that tipped the cops to the boss, rat," he snarled. "We're going to get you."

Colby Lyman knew what the queer-looking guns were. They are called "magnum" guns. They will go through the engine block of a heavy motor car. It is supposed to be impossible for a criminal to buy one. Apparently, it wasn't. "Bignose" squeezed the trigger of his weapon. It roared like a field gun. The slug plowed through the steel wall, split the desk beside which Colby was standing.

The Keyhole reached for a switch. Brilliant calcium lights flashed on in the room of mirrors. Their sunlike intensity was picked up by dozens of glass panels. The gangsters were blinded. The men with the Tommy guns squeezed trigger releases. The guns roared in a bedlam. A mirror slid down behind the gunmen. For each mirror that shattered, another slid before it. The confusion was complete.

It was not unusual that the gangsters killed each other. It was impossible to tell who was a reflection.

"I thought that was a good idea," Colby said flatly. "Now I am sure of it."

HE was interrupted by the soft throbbing of a muted phone bell. The voice was not soft. It was a cry of excitement.

"Skean says I've turned against my father," she cried into the phone. "He's here now. He says the Crescent Moon——"

The receiver clicked on the other end of the line. Ling Su's face was a drawn mask of pain. The voice had carried into the room.

Colby Lyman was moving before Ling Su could speak. The little Chinese followed like a launch in the wake of a liner. Colby didn't wait for an elevator. He went down five flights of stairs so fast the building shook.

A cab whirled them toward Chinatown. It jolted to a stop in front of the expensive quarters of the Golden Serpent Tong. Colby Lyman pounded up the steps. A squat Chinese was on guard at the door. The Keyhole swept him aside, stepped silently into the room.

Jenny Bon Char sat on a stool. Mitters Skean towered over her. Stone-faced tongmen stood about them. Their black eyes revealed nothing.

"Your father is not here," Skean said. "We believe you have delivered him into the hands of the Crescent Moon Tong. They will no doubt kill him."

A gaunt Chinese in oriental robes advanced toward the girl. He drew a long knife from his sleeve.

"Perhaps you know where your father is, Little Flower," he purred. "If so, you had best tell."

Ling Su and The Keyhole had been flattened against the wall. As the gaunt Chinese advanced, Ling Su hurled himself forward. Then he screamed in his native tongue, knocked the knife from the hands of the oldster. Skean stepped back, a snarl on his lips. Other Chinese began closing in.

A knife slashed at Ling Su. Colby slapped the knife to the floor, hurled its wielder aside. Suddenly, the door burst open and the room swarmed with other figures.

"Get the girl," a voice cried. "We may need her."

A SHOT roared, and the single light in the room went out. Then there was another roar, not from a gun. An incendiary bomb blasted in a corner. Red flame flickered, ate its way up the side of the wall. The room was a fantastic glow of red.

"The Crescent Moon!" a high voice screamed. "It is our enemy."

Colby's fists pumped up and down; a blackjack thudded against his skull. He saw rough hands seize Jenny Bon Char. Ling Su lay at his feet, moaning in pain. An ugly red welt showed on his forehead. Colby snatched the girl from her captor. But the other figures swarmed over The Keyhole. They clubbed savagely at his head.

Colby twisted under their bulk. His pudgy fingers dug into his vest pocket, came out with a small circle of steel. He slipped it over a finger of Jenny Bon Char, whispered into her ear. She nodded. The object was a newspaper handler's knife. Twisted inside the palm, it showed as a thin silver ring on her finger. If her captors did not find it, she might free herself from bonds that would tie her. Then The Keyhole lost consciousness.

Searing pain brought back his senses. Red flames licked at the flooring, burned his flesh. He staggered to his feet, nearly tripped over the huddled form of Ling Su. He picked up his friend and carried him down to the street.

When he had revived Ling Su, Colby Lyman asked him a question.

"No, master," the Chinese replied. "They were not men of the Crescent Moon Tong. I never saw them before."

Colby Lyman's eyes slitted. There had to be an answer. Somehow, he felt that it lay right before his nose. The answer had to lie with Jenny Bon Char and her father. Both, he was sure, had been kidnaped. By whom——

Colby shook his head.

CHAPTER IV.

THE KEYHOLE ACTS.

INCENSE burned in the clubroom of the Crescent Moon Tong. Ling Su sat at the table on the raised dais at one end. He was clothed in the silken robes of the Orient. His face was drawn and haggard. Before him stood two figures. They were the distinguished visitors to the city.

"Honorable one," the smaller of the two intoned, "Chang Kuo Fei and this humble one are abject that we have caused you this trouble. We cannot understand the reason for the things that have occurred."

His companion bowed his head.

"Our lives are but chaff," he offered. "That they have been attempted is of no moment. But our cause means the saving of thousands. Cannot some one help us?"

Ling Su's lips moved slowly.

"It has been suggested that the aid of one person be sought," he replied. "He is one known as The Keyhole. His aid has to-night been petitioned."

A low murmur ran around the room. Tongmen moved restlessly. No one noticed the fat Chinese seated next to the door. Flowing robes concealed his tremendous girth. But he still looked immense—the fat one was chewing a match stick with slow, rhythmic motion. His eyes looked up toward the ceiling. A canted mirror there gave a view of the stairs leading to the clubroom. Suddenly, he stood erect, shuffled toward the door.

Jenny Bon Char groped up the stairs. Her wrists were lacerated, her dress torn in a dozen places. Colby Lyman met her halfway up the stairs.

"Let me talk to Ling Su," she moaned. "My father is a prisoner. Perhaps by now he is dead."

Colby deterred her.

"It was I who gave you the knife to free yourself," he said. "Tell me what you have learned."

Jenny turned. Then her eyes went wide with recognition. She did not know The Keyhole. But she did know Colby Lyman, a friend of Ling Su.

She said she had been taken to an underground shack on the water front. Her father was tied there. They had started to torture her, thinking it would wring secrets from Johnny Wu. It seemed they wanted a list of persons who knew something. What it was, she hadn't been able to learn. When they turned their backs toward her, she had cut her bonds and escaped. She gave Colby Lyman the address.

The Keyhole raced down the stairs. He was sure now that Johnny Wu had been duped from the start. But what Johnny Wu knew—or thought he knew—The Keyhole had to find out.

THE underground shack by the river was not difficult to find. In fact, it was far too easy for comfort. The ground gave way beneath Colby Lyman's feet as he searched for the entrance. The roof had not been constructed to stand up under such weight as The Keyhole's.

He plunged downward, stopped abruptly, face-to-face with Johnny Wu. Johnny was tied. And his throat was slit from one ear to the other.

The Keyhole whirled, found himself facing two hard-eyed hatchet men. He instantly recognized them as thugs wanted in half a dozen cities for murder. They belonged to no tong. No tong would have them. They were professional killers.

One snarled, snapped up a heavy automatic.

"Meddling American," he rasped. "You die because you have seen more than you should."

His companion's eyes glittered.

"Killing an ox should not be a crime," he observed. "This one is the size of a cow."

The two killers laughed. They jabbered rapid jargon to each other. It was in the singsong tones of southern Chinese.

Colby Lyman's mouth dropped open. He suddenly saw the thing that had evaded his mind. His eyes stared straight ahead in his comprehension. For an instant, he forgot where he was, forgot that two deadly automatics were pointed at his body.

It just happened that Colby was staring at the shack's only door. But his gaze was so rapt that it made the thugs turn. For a fraction of a second, they thought reënforcements for their visitor were behind them. That fraction proved enough.

The Keyhole came out of his trance as fast as he had entered it. He plunged silently forward. One killer dropped with a neck that was fractured. The other blasted once, then squealed like a rabbit in a snare. The snare tightened and the squeal was shut off.

Colby Lyman raced up the street. He thought he saw the answer to a murderous tong war. He saw how a scheming brain had caused men to hate. And if he could move fast enough now, The Keyhole was sure he could save many lives.

CHAPTER V.

A RACKET IN MILLIONS.

THE KEYHOLE stopped at the *Index*. He scooped up his phone and dialed a number. He got one of Redwood City's foremost bankers out of bed. He asked several questions.

"There is no doubt about it," the banker said. "The signatures are utterly genuine. The originals were sent under seal by a government in China. Endorsements on deposits and checks drawn are the same. There is no possibility of forgery. We are quite careful with accounts of this type."

The Keyhole hung up. That had been one thing he had to be sure of. He had to be certain there were no forgeries in the accounts of Jung P'u Li and Chang Kuo Fei.

His fat hand seized a stylus pencil. It was jointed by two heavy wires, like the apex of a triangle. When he wrote with that, a similar

NEXT MONTH

Here's an idea of what's coming to you in the next issue of *Crime Busters!* We're counting on Kenneth Robeson to be in that issue, together with another Carrie Cashin story by Theodore Tinsley; a Norgil novelette, "The Ghost That Came Back", by Maxwell Grant; Lester Dent with another crazy Gadget Man novelette, "The Wild Indians"; a story by Norman A. Daniels, a Red Brennan tale by Steve Fisher, and others.

Our new sales date is the last Wednesday of every month. Be on hand at your news stand to get your issue promptly, and tell your friends about the great yarns which pack every issue of *Crime Busters*. They'll thank you for giving them the good tip.

stylus wrote identically in the office of the publisher of the *Index*. When he signed it "Harold Jenkins," the orders were carried out to the letter.

"The Keyhole column will go on the air for the Index Hour," he wrote. *"The paper will set type from the broadcast."*

Colby looked at his watch. The *Index* Hour was due on the air in twenty minutes. Crooks and honest citizens alike listened to that program. Frequently, The Keyhole would broadcast. Crooks sometimes learned they were headed for a chair with electrodes for ornaments. The world frequently found that some crime had been smashed.

To-night, The Keyhole expected the broadcast to finish a tong war.

He dictated rapidly into a specially built dictaphone. Then he set the cylinder under an electrical pick-up needle and adjusted a dial. The Keyhole would be on the air. But Colby Lyman would be elsewhere.

In ten more minutes, the fat Chinese was back at the door of the Crescent Moon clubroom. A fast car belonging to The Keyhole was parked on the street below.

MITTERS SKEAN was there. With him was an old Chinese with wrinkled face and toothless gums. He was the patriarch of Chinatown. He had never stirred from Redwood City since he had become Chinatown's original inhabitant. As the oldest resident, his words bore weight. They called him *"huli,"* which means fox.

"You have caused much death," he told Ling Su. "My eyes are dim, so I do not know the reason. But your tong is held responsible for murder. It must stop."

Jenny Bon Char thrust herself between the two men.

"Ling Su has done nothing," she cried. "He has tried his best to stop it."

Ling Su pushed her aside. His mouth was grim.

"The lives of the honorable visitors have been endangered," he said quietly. "That has started a tong war. The Crescent Moon is not at fault."

The two distinguished visitors were silent. Colby Lyman drifted to a radio at one side of the room. He flicked it on and shuffled back to the door. The sign-off theme song of one program ended. In another minute, The Keyhole was on the air.

"A murderous tong war will end to-morrow," the voice stated. *"It has been a war caused by the greed of a white man. A high official of the Chinese Embassy in Washington is on his way here under heavy guard. He will be able to unmask the cause of the murders. Then the knife and the hatchet will yield to an occidental electric chair."*

There was more, but Colby Lyman did not stay to hear it. He drifted down the stairs.

A few seconds later, a huge telephone lineman clipped earphones to the wires of a pole near by. His eyes were a pale, bluish-white. There were two phone booths in the store below the rooms of the Crescent Moon Tong. One of them was in use.

The Keyhole caught an address that was familiar. Then he knew he was right. He slid down the pole, ran to his parked automobile. The gears meshed silently and the car shot ahead. The Keyhole headed for a fashionable suburb of the city.

THE estate was a huge, lonely expanse. The great house was set well back in the trees. Colby's car roared up the driveway. That was a reckless procedure. But there was no time to be lost.

He passed under a bright light in the ceiling of the Colonial porch when he left the car. As he did, a small, rabbitlike man opened the door. The small man looked at Colby Lyman. He was vaguely familiar to The Keyhole. Without hesitation, he whipped out an automatic and started to fire.

The Keyhole backed down the steps. His own Luger .45 flashed in his hand. He didn't want to shoot. But the small man gave him no choice. The Keyhole fired once and the little man went down.

When Colby turned him over, his regrets were fewer. He thought of the "doctor" who had knifed old Jim Atterby on the train. The rabbitlike man had a prominent mole on his right thumb.

The Keyhole raced into the house. He heard a pounding in a cellar room below. Colby took the steps four at a time, tore through a dim-lit corridor. A room at the end was locked, but the key was in the door. Colby whipped the door open, and two figures staggered out. They seemed weak from hunger.

They gasped out words Colby could not understand. They spoke Chinese. But there was no singsong lilt to their language. It was the stilted, formal dialect of Mandarin Pekinese. It was as easy to distinguish as the words of a foreign song recited without the music. The difference was the absence of the music. The Keyhole knew then that these were the *real* emissaries from China.

"I am a friend," Colby Lyman said. "Do not be afraid."

The two seemed to straighten in hope. They barraged The Keyhole with questions. That was why he did not hear the automobile that purred up the driveway. The first sound Colby heard was a harsh laugh behind him. He turned to see Morton Starson at the end of the cellar passageway. He held an automatic in one hand. In the other was a Mills grenade.

"YOU were fast, my friend," Starson sneered. "But not fast enough. I will kill all three of you now."

Colby Lyman backed slowly.

"Remember, you need these two men once more," he drawled. "You will have to pick up your marbles fast and get away. This fraud will come out now. Also the murders of all who have recently been to China, who might have recognized your impostors, including Jim Atterby."

Starson laughed shrilly.

"Wrong again," he snarled. "I have one check that has been signed. With that, I will clear the account. There is nearly a million in it already. My two stooges will take the rap. I will kill them in self-defense, when I suddenly discover they are impostors. Your bodies will never be found. That will just be a mystery."

Colby's gun began to come up. Then he stopped. He didn't think he would be forced to shoot.

Starson's pinkish face seemed to glow with anticipation. But his grin suddenly twisted to rage. A sibilant curse split the air behind him.

"So, you would do that, Mr. Starson?"

Morton Starson whirled. The two impostors he had foisted upon the city crouched behind him. They, too, had decided to be in on the kill. Starson jerked up his automatic. It spat flame and lead. But the other two men were shooting, too. A slug hit the fake philanthropist in the shoulder, spun him half around. The Mills bomb shot from nerveless fingers.

But Colby Lyman noticed that the release pin still encircled the big man's finger. He knocked the two Chinese behind him back into the room that had been their prison. He fell upon them, hugged his huge bulk to the floor. The detonation that followed ended whatever plans Starson and his two confederates might have entertained.

IN the clubroom of the Society of the Crescent Moon, there was a gathering of many men. They belonged to rival tongs. Hu Li, the fox, sat in the chair of authority. His venerable age gave him the right of an arbiter.

Colby Lyman spoke to the group. He was again the fat Chinese who had watched the clubroom door.

"Who I am does not matter," Colby said. "I am merely a friend. Not until many murders had occurred did I realize that the fraudulent visitors spoke in Cantonese. They were presumed to be officials of a government in China. We all should know that the stilted phrases of Mandarin are the only dialect recognized or used by Chinese officials. But sometimes the obvious will escape us.

"When I learned there were no forgeries, I knew the real envoys were still alive. There had to be many checks and endorsements. Starson had to know of the plot; he had met Chang Kuo Fei and Jung P'u Li in China. They planned to steal a fund destined to run into millions. And they knew the arrival of an official from the Embassy would unmask them."

Hu Li spoke.

"One of our number recognized the fraud," he intoned. "He wrongfully believed the other tong knew of the deceit. Now he is dead. We must realize that such impetuosity brings only disaster. There must be peace between the tongs."

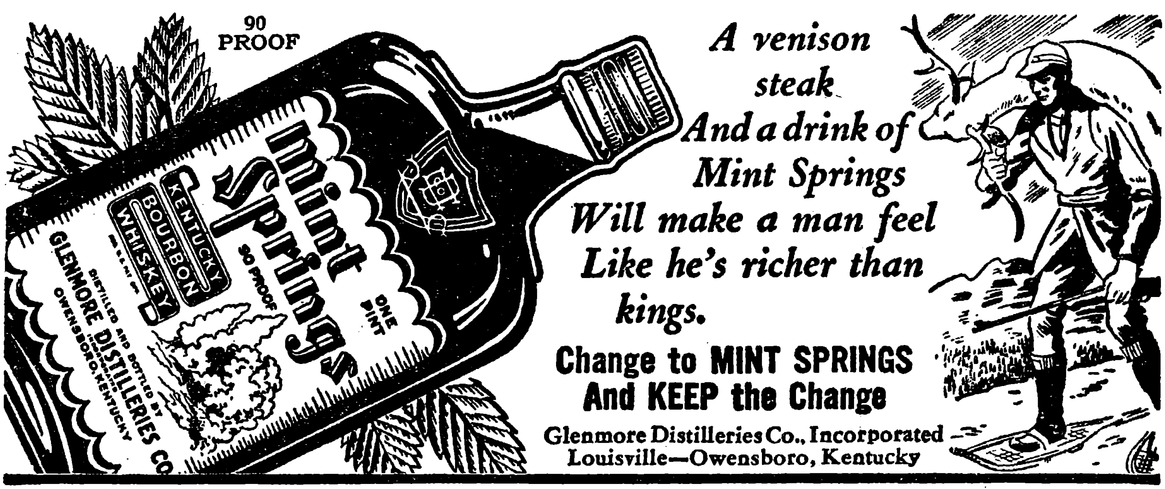
Colby Lyman saw Jenny Bon Char reach for the hand of Ling Su. He caught the eye of Hu Li.

"Dynasties have been welded together by the son of one and the daughter of the other," he observed. "They should wed."

Hu Li grinned toothlessly.

"So it shall be," he said. "Then all will be well."

But Colby Lyman wondered where he could find another valet as efficient as the one he was losing.



*A venison steak
And a drink of
Mint Springs
Will make a man feel
Like he's richer than
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And KEEP the Change**

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Continued from page 21

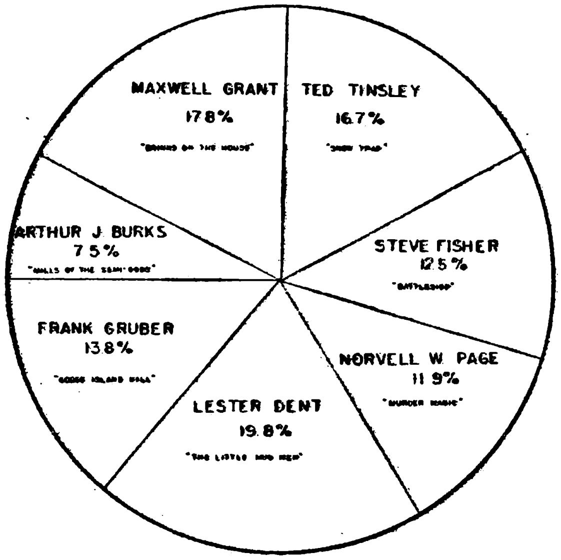
Fisher following in that order. The others came out as shown.

The March issue was a dandy! Two ties! Theodore Tinsley came through in first place, with Norvell W. Page second. Maxwell Grant and Lester Dent tied for third place, Harold A. Davis came next, and Laurence Donovan and Steve Fisher ended up in a tie.

The April issue brought Lester Dent in first place, Maxwell Grant second, Theodore Tinsley third, Frank Gruber fourth, Steve Fisher fifth, and Norvell Page and Arthur J. Burks closing up the issue.

In addition to giving us your choice of stories, you also asked us for your favorite authors. Many of you wanted Kenneth Robeson, author of the Doc Savage novels in "Doc Savage Magazine," to be added to our list. We had to take all these letters to Mr. Robeson to convince him that he should do some stories for us, but now he's convinced, and you'll be getting Kenneth Robeson's stories. The first one will appear in the next issue. Mr. Robeson gave us his word, just as he was sailing for Europe on the *Queen Mary* the other day, that the first yarn would be in on time! You also asked for George Allan Moffat, whose story appears in this issue; for Norman A. Daniels, whom we have scheduled for an early issue; and for many others. We were especially pleased to know that the authors you wanted were the very ones we had already asked for material, and most of them are now at work on tales for us. We hesitate to give you names, because sometimes stories need rewriting, thus postponing their appearance, and we do not want to make promises that we might not keep on schedule.

APRIL

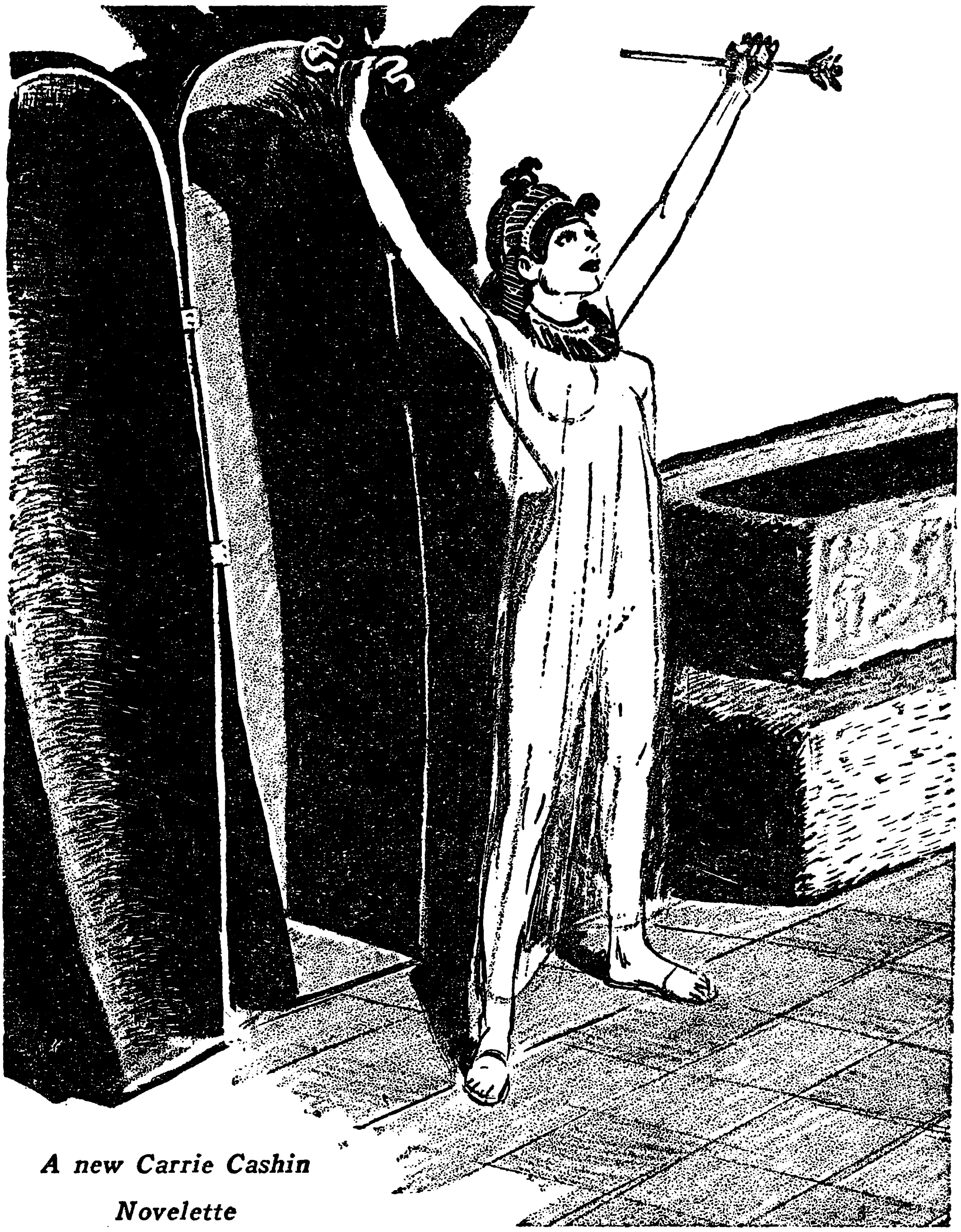


Keep on telling us just what you think of every story we print. Give us all the suggestions that come to your mind when you read this magazine. When we first asked for your votes and your comments, there were many who thought it was a foolish, reckless idea. However, it's proven itself to be the best thing we could have done, for, guiding ourselves by your reaction, we've built up *Crime Busters* until it's right up on top of the heap! And that's in six months' time—which is something to brag about! In other words, by taking you readers into our confidence, we've been able to give you exactly what you want without any wasted effort, and the results show that it has been worth while from every standpoint. Our circulation has gone up and up consistently; your satisfaction, as expressed in your letters, has likewise constantly increased. Every one of you has brought us more friends because you've been fully satisfied, and if all you readers keep that up, there'll be no stopping *Crime Busters!* At our low price of ten cents, we give you as many actual pages of text as many books priced higher, and

Continued on page 125

Lovely Carrie Cashin mixes it up with a gal four thousand years old—and Aleck is left to solve the puzzle of the

BLACK QUEEN



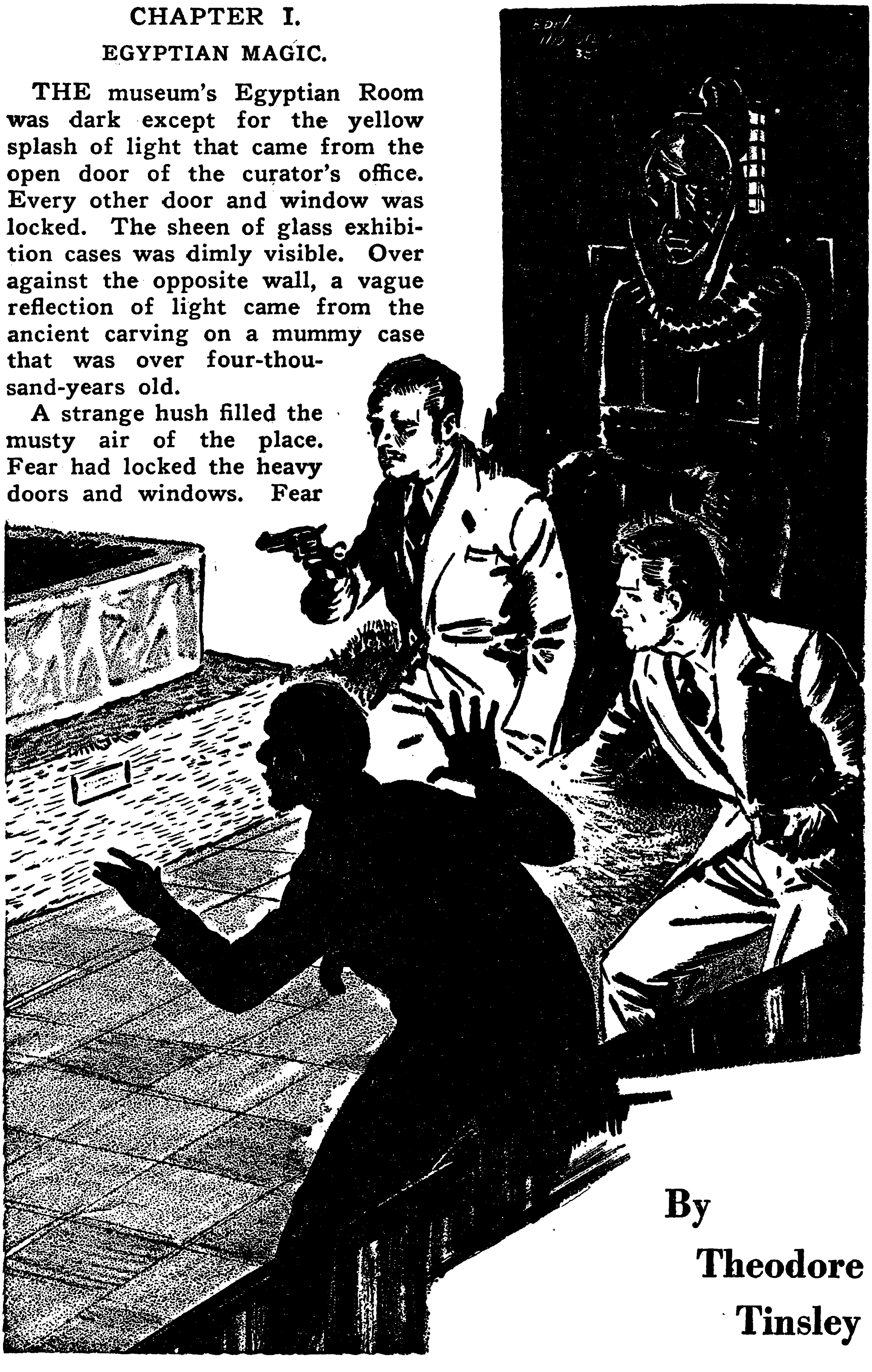
A new Carrie Cashin Novelette

CHAPTER I.

EGYPTIAN MAGIC.

THE museum's Egyptian Room was dark except for the yellow splash of light that came from the open door of the curator's office. Every other door and window was locked. The sheen of glass exhibition cases was dimly visible. Over against the opposite wall, a vague reflection of light came from the ancient carving on a mummy case that was over four-thousand-years old.

A strange hush filled the musty air of the place. Fear had locked the heavy doors and windows. Fear

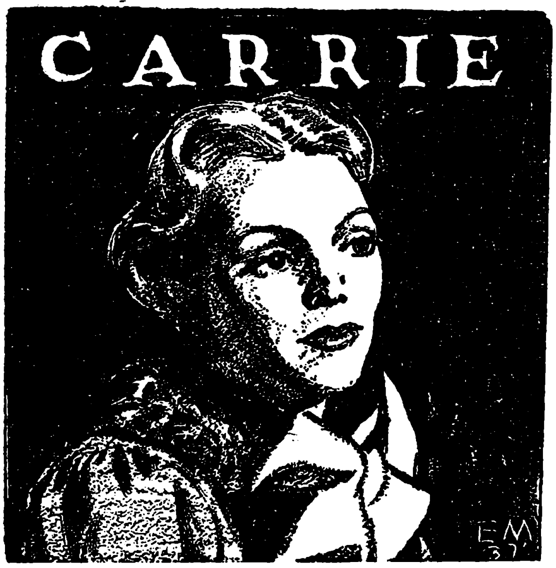


By
Theodore
Tinsley

had turned off the bright ceiling lights by whose brilliance the night watchman customarily made his rounds.

The watchman was no longer employed by the museum. On the preceding night at the stroke of twelve, he had fled screaming from the Egyptian Room. He had looked on the living, evil beauty of a queen of Egypt whose body had been dead for more than four thousand years!

In the curator's office three men were conferring in uneasy whispers. Their eyes watched a very pretty girl who seemed perfectly calm, completely at ease.



Carrie Cashin smiled demurely. She was the cleverest woman detective in New York. She had organized the "CASH AND CARRY DETECTIVE AGENCY—You Pay and We Deliver!" and had made it the most successful private agency in town. Few people realized that "Cash and Carry" was an amusing reversal of her own name. The public thought that big, broad-shouldered Aleck was the boss. Carrie didn't mind that. She was well aware that most clients mistrusted women detectives. So she let Aleck "front" for her—as he was doing now with these two museum officials.

The clock on the wall boomed a single solemn note: 11:30. Only half an hour before midnight——

Carrie rose from her chair. There was a table opposite her, covered with rather strange materials—yards upon yards of white bandage, a clay mask, a small bamboo tube, a sharp-pointed object like a shoemaker's awl. Knowing what she had agreed to do, Carrie Cashin's face turned suddenly pink with embarrassment. But her voice was crisply clear.

"I'm ready, gentlemen."

Her hand moved swiftly to the neckline of her modish gown. She jerked a zipper downward—and the gown split open along its side from throat to hem. Carrie stepped out of it. She folded the empty gown neatly over the back of a chair.

The curator of Egyptology gasped. So did his assistant.

CARRIE'S figure was clad from throat to ankle in nothing but silken fleshings. Conscious that the two Egyptologists' gaze was riveted on her, Carrie felt her breathing quicken. But Aleck — bless his heart! — had averted his face. His voice sounded embarrassed.

"Come on! Let's get going!"

The curator and his assistant began winding the white lengths of bandage about the stiffly poised girl, working carefully and methodically. Swiftly, the tight wrapping covered Carrie until only her head was exposed.

"The clay mask, please," the curator muttered.

His hand shook slightly as he turned toward the table.

His name was Ronald Carfax. It was he who had come to the detective agency to hire Aleck. He was a tall, gray-haired man, probably close to sixty. His hands were large, with thick, muscular fingers. He looked stronger and more alert than most men of forty, and acted more like such a man.

Denslow, his assistant, handed him the clay mask obediently. But there was worry in the younger man's words. He said:

"You're risking this girl's life! I don't like it, sir. The Black Queen, Asnara, was a sorceress. Her golden asp was the symbol of evil. Surely you, of all people, should know that Asnara possessed strange powers that no scientist has ever been able to——"

"Bosh!" Carfax said. "I intend to get to the bottom of what happened last night. I suspect crime. Why are you so anxious to avoid a test?"

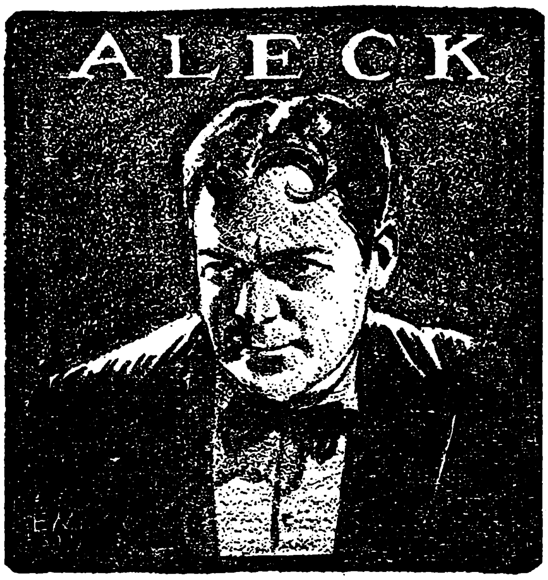
Denslow tightened his lips. He said nothing more. Carrie liked his solicitude for her, but she liked Carfax's logic better. She had no belief in ghosts, modern or ancient.

But she twisted her head for an instant as Carfax lifted the clay mask.

"There's a lipstick in my handbag, Aleck. When I'm completely covered, make a small red cross on my bandaged forehead." She laughed briefly. "I don't want to be mixed up with a gal who's been dead four thousand years."

Carfax adjusted the clay mask. Denslow helped him tape it tightly. In a few moments, the bandaging was complete. The only difference between Carrie Cashin and the centuries-old Queen Asnara was a hollow bamboo tube that allowed Carrie to breathe, and the tiny holes in the wrapping over her eyes that permitted the nervy girl a pin-point area of vision

She was entirely helpless. Aleck held her upright, while Carfax and his assistant hurried across the dark Egyptian Room. When they returned, they were carrying the ancient mummy of the Black Queen of the Nile. They propped it in a corner of the curator's office.



ALECK helped Carfax to transfer Carrie to the sarcophagus from which Asnara had been taken. It stood vertically against the wall. He closed the lid carefully. There was sweat on his forehead and a queer emptiness in his stomach.

He hated to leave Carrie in that damned stone coffin! What if Denslow were right, and the apparition on the preceding midnight was real? Aleck felt the hair crawl on his scalp. He knew enough Egyptian history to realize that Asnara, the Black Queen, had been the most infamous priestess of evil in a dynasty that made Cleopatra's wickedness seem childish——

The clock in Carfax's office pointed to five minutes before midnight. Carfax turned out the light. The three men tiptoed across the Egyptian Room behind the tiny glow of Aleck's electric torch. There was a gun in Aleck's right hand. Denslow, too, carried a weapon. But

Carfax was unarmed. He seemed grimly amused by the superstition of his companions.

He led the way toward a glass jewel case. There was an electric-light switch on the wall above the case. Aleck snapped off his torch. The three men waited breathlessly in darkness.

Aleck's eyes remained glued on the sarcophagus against the opposite wall. He could barely make out its shadowy outline. He knew that Carrie had a small, keen-bladed knife in her grasp under the mummy wrappings. But could she manipulate the knife if she had sudden need to free herself?

Denslow opened his mouth to say something—then stiffened rigidly. A faint, eerie sound was audible from within the closed sarcophagus. The soft *miaow* of a cat!

The door of the mummy case was opening——

Aleck's torch threw a quick cone of brilliance.

A woman seemed to float slowly from the ancient coffin. She was lovelier than any woman Aleck had ever seen. Her body under a gauzy robe was a pale milky glow. Her hair was jet-black under an antique headdress of ancient Egypt. Both arms were uplifted, the hands bent at the wrists. In one hand she carried an ivory scepter. In the other was a golden asp.

Aleck saw flame in her eyes. He wasn't dreaming! He saw her eyes burn like molten metal.

Instinctively, his gun flung upward. He fired. So did Denslow. The roar of their shots filled the chamber with booming echoes.

Asnara did not stop. There was no change in her flame-filled eyes, no bullet mark against the lovely body under the filmy drape.

The golden asp pointed at Denslow's cowering figure.

Denslow uttered a shrill cry. His hand darted to his throat. His cry choked into nothingness as his body crashed to the floor. The Black Queen leaned over the jewel case alongside the wall. Drops of blood dripped from her ivory scepter to the glass top of the case

Aleck was unable to move a muscle. Carfax, crouched beside Aleck, was stark with terror. Neither of them stirred until the door of the sarcophagus clicked shut.

Then, with a gasping cry, Carfax recovered his wits. His hand clawed at the electric-light switch. The lamps in the ceiling of the Egyptian Room glowed brightly.

HUGH DENSLOW lay twisted and rigid on the floor. His face was bluish, his sightless eyes wide open. Aleck listened at his heart, felt swiftly for the beat of his pulse. There was none.

Aleck sprang to his feet. He remembered that Carrie Cashin was inside that ancient coffin from which the Black Queen of Egypt had emerged and vanished. He started to race across the brilliantly lighted chamber.

Carfax halted him with a numbing grip. The curator was staring at the blood-dappled glass case over which Asnara had pointed her ivory scepter.

"The jewels!" he gasped. "They're gone!"

For an instant, Aleck thought that Carfax had gone mad. The jewels had not been disturbed. They sparkled in all the colors of the rainbow.

But Carfax fumbled for a key ring. He opened the glass lid with tremulous haste. His expert eye had detected a fraud that was not clear to Aleck's wondering gaze. The curator shouted:

"The real jewels are gone. These are paste. Look!"

He picked up a magnificent diamond from a plush cushion. He cut savagely at it with the stone of his own ring. The result was startling. Across the sparkling facets of what was supposed to be a priceless diamond from the tombs of Egypt, appeared an ugly gouge. Swiftly, Carfax tested three or four others. Paste—all of them!

Rage drove fear out of Carfax's eyes. He glared at the dead figure of his assistant, cried out:

"Denslow's the thief! He's the guilty rat! No wonder he didn't want me to hire a detective. But Asnara killed him! By the Lord, she rose from the grave to avenge the theft of her own jewels!"

He pointed at a printed card inside the glass case. It read:

Collection of precious and semi-precious gems taken from the tomb of Asnara, the Black Queen, at the time of her discovery in 1894 by the Carfax Expedition.

Aleck took one wondering look and then wrenched himself away. He ran straight toward the coffin where Carrie Cashin had imprisoned herself. He had a terrified feeling that the coffin would be empty.

CHAPTER II.

MISSING PERSONS.

BUT he was mistaken. Ripping open the door of the huge, vertical sarcophagus, he saw with a gulp of relief a mummy with a crimson lipstick cross on its bandaged forehead.

He started to tilt the mummy forward. Across the chamber Carfax had picked up the body of his dead assistant. He was carrying him toward his office.

"I'll help you in just a moment," Carfax cried. "I'm going to telephone for the police!"

He disappeared into his office with effortless strides, in spite of the weight of Denslow's body. Aleck's eyes narrowed. He thought grimly about something he had seen at the moment of Denslow's death. But he didn't follow the curator into the office.

Turning, he bent over the wrapped figure he had lowered to the floor. There was a faint odor of spice from the bandages. Aleck knew that when he had helped prop Carry in the coffin, he had felt warmth from her imprisoned body.

This mummy was icy cold!

The crimson lipstick cross on the forehead was larger than the one Aleck had made. And there was no sign of a bamboo breathing tube!

Carfax was bent over the telephone as Aleck crossed the threshold of the curator's office. His back was toward Aleck. He was furiously clicking at the hook of the telephone.

One swift glance toward the corner of the room and Aleck's eyes bulged. The mummy of the Black Queen was gone! The corner was empty!

Carfax was still jiggling the phone hook. Aleck swung him brutally around. He pointed grimly.

"Where's the mummy? How did it get out of here?"

Carfax stared, then his face went deathly pale. His eyes bulged with what seemed to be complete astonishment.

"Asnara—gone?" he faltered. "I—I never noticed. Someone must have stolen the mummy before I came into the office. I—I dashed straight to the phone. My back was turned. I——"

His voice became suddenly shrill.

"What about your assistant? The girl that we——"

"Gone," Aleck grated. "She's not in the coffin outside. Someone kidnaped her and substituted the mummy of the Black Queen."

"That's ridiculous," Carfax gasped.

"It's true. But someone's going to explain about it right now."

"Who?"

"You!"

CARFAX recoiled, his eyes slitted and strange. "You're crazy!"

"Maybe," Aleck growled. He twisted Carfax around so that both men were facing an empty couch across the room. "Where's Denslow? What happened to your assistant's body?"

Carfax glared at the couch. There was a deep indentation on the upholstery. It was obvious that a body had been placed there—and just as obvious that the body was now gone.

The gray-haired curator of Egyptology seemed barely able to talk.

"It's—it's black magic. I laid Denslow right where you're pointing. He seems to have vanished while my back was turned."

"Yeah? Your back must have been turned a hell of a long while," Aleck said harshly. "By the way, did you call police headquarters?"

Carfax shook his head. A wary look crept into his narrowed eyes.

"There's something wrong with the phone. I couldn't get a connection."

Aleck snatched the receiver and placed it to his ear. He jiggled the hook briefly. He knew enough about "dead" phones to realize instantly what the trouble was. Tracing the wire from the bell box, he found a spot behind a bookcase where it had been cut close to the baseboard.

Aleck straightened instantly, his eyes alert. From the top of the bookcase, he picked up a pair of heavy shears. The blade edges were nicked where they had cut through the insulated wire.

"Where did these come from?"

"They're mine," Carfax admitted. "They usually hang on a hook above my desk. I—I use them to clip magazine articles that interest me."

"Did you use them to clip that phone wire?"

Carfax's hesitation vanished instantly. He became cold, almost threatening.

"What do you mean by that remark?"

"I mean plenty," Aleck told him. "For instance, I'm not satisfied with a supernatural explanation of young Denslow's death. When that damned Black Queen, or whatever it was, pointed her golden asp at Denslow, I noticed your arm went up, too."

"What of it? I was frightened."

"I saw your hand swerve outward the exact instant Denslow died! What did you do—throw a poisoned dart into his throat? He clutched at his throat and tried to cry out as he fell dying. Then his body mysteriously disappears! Was that to keep police investigators from finding the poisoned dart in his flesh?"

Carfax didn't answer. He clenched his fist. It was a strongly corded and powerful fist. Aleck watched him for trouble as he summed up his suspicions.

"You were standing next to Denslow when he died. You were in here when his body vanished. The phone wire was cut so no one could call police headquarters without delay—and you can't tell me who did it. Every damn thing you've said and done——"

ALECK was prepared for attack, but the blow came so swiftly that he was unable to dodge it completely. Had the punch landed solidly, as Carfax intended, Aleck would have been knocked cold. But his ducking head made the blow skid painfully along his temple.

He dropped to one knee, pulling the curator down with him. They wrestled on the floor in a furious battle. Then Aleck thrust his doubled knee into Carfax's midriff. The crack of his fist finished the combat.

He lugged Carfax to a closet door and shoved him inside. He locked the door and dropped the key into his pocket.

Then he raced across the Egyptian Room to the sarcophagus of the Black Queen. The mummy of Asnara still lay where he had tumbled it to the floor. He stepped over it and squeezed inside the upright coffin.

He knew there was only one way in which Carrie Cashin could have vanished—through the wall of the museum. He was sure of it when he found that the stone coffin had no rear. His knuckles rapped on wood. Frail, wood, too! Listening, he could hear a hollow echo.

He drove his fist through the thin wood, clutched at it and ripped it apart.

His electric torch showed him that the thick, old-fashioned wall of the museum was hollow. To the left, it led into horizontal darkness; to the right, there were narrow, ladderlike steps.

Aleck raced down those steep steps. Turning at the bottom, he followed the passage as it turned sharply at a right angle. When he reached another narrow flight of steps leading upward, he knew exactly where he was headed. He was not surprised when he lifted a trapdoor on oiled hinges and stared into the empty office of Ronald Carfax.

The curator was still locked inside the closet. Aleck's lips tightened. The magic transfer of Asnara's mummy to the sarcophagus in the Egyptian Room was no longer a mystery. But what had happened to Carrie? Aleck darted back through the wall passage to the spot where he had entered it from the mummy case. He hurried along in the opposite direction.

Again he descended narrow steps. But this time he came to a blank end that felt like solid masonry when he rapped on it.

He was unable to find any evidence of an exit. But when he turned his light to the side wall, he saw a thumbnail indentation in the smooth surface.

He pressed his nail into the tiny depression, manipulating it up and down, left and right. Useless! He was sweating with anxiety, desperate at the delay, when he discovered the correct answer. The secret of the panel mechanism was a *circular motion* of the slot. The moment Aleck's thumb turned clockwise, he heard the click of a concealed spring.

The panel slid aside.

ALECK found himself in a tiny storeroom filled with pails, brushes and mops. It was evidently a place where museum employees stored their cleaning implements. There was one window, and it was open at the bottom. Below was soft turf, a gravel automobile drive, and beyond it a mass of shrubs and bushes. The distance to the turf was barely five feet.

Dropping noiselessly, Aleck examined the turf with a quick flash of his torch. He saw the mark where a heavy object had fallen. There were tire imprints on the graveled drive near by, but no sign of a car.

The trail of Carrie Cashin had come to a hopeless end.

But a feeble groan from the darkness beyond the driveway made Aleck's blood tingle with sudden hope. He darted past a row of small private garages, evidently used by museum officials. All were locked. The groaning came from the bushes beyond the last garage.

A man in a gray, special policeman's uniform lay under a tangled thicket. A heavy blow against the back of his skull had matted his hair with blood.

He was the outside guard employed by the museum to watch doors and windows. Bending over him, Aleck succeeded in partially rousing the dazed man. He listened grimly to slow, gasping words.

The guard's story was simple. He had noticed an automobile standing in the driveway, directly below an opened museum window. There was nothing about this particular sedan to alarm him; but he didn't like the looks of the two men who stood hunched in shadow. Hurrying closer, he recognized both the men.

They were museum attendants who had been discharged several weeks earlier. One of them was Sam Parker, who had been fired for drunkenness. The other was George Kelly, who had been discharged for an attempt to steal small art objects from the room he was supposed to guard.

It was Sam who had throttled the watchman. George's gun butt had swung savagely before the choking victim could tear himself free.

"Why did you say there was nothing about that parked sedan to alarm you?" Aleck asked. "Was it a car you recognized?"

"Yes. It belonged to the curator of Egyptology, Doctor Carfax."

Aleck's jaw tightened. He helped the watchman to his feet. But the man was badly hurt. His face paled as he tried to take a forward step. He pitched forward unconscious.

ALECK left him and ran back toward the museum window. He had all the facts he needed to know. He was still ignorant of where Carrie Cashin had been taken, but the answer to the whole criminal riddle was back there in that locked closet of the curator's office. He'd take that damned hypocritical Ronald Carfax by the throat and shake the truth out of him—if he had to scatter teeth all over the office!

A quick upward leap slid Aleck over the sill of the opened window through which the kidnaper had fled. He darted into the narrow wall passage and followed it swiftly, his torch beam gleaming ahead of his racing feet like a yellow will-o'-the-wisp.

In a few minutes he was back in Carfax's office. He took two grim steps toward the closet where he had locked the curator. Then he uttered an oath of rage and despair.

The closet door was wide open. Carfax was gone.

Aleck's face paled as he realized how badly he had bungled the whole case. A jewel robbery had been committed under his very eyes. Denslow had been murdered and his body stolen. Carfax had escaped. Undoubtedly, the curator had a duplicate key to the closet in his pocket. Carrie Cashin would have searched him to make sure. Aleck had been dumb enough to forget.

Aleck cursed his folly. Then, suddenly, he stiffened.

A telephone bell was ringing.

Aleck darted to the phone and lifted it eagerly. Nothing happened. He had forgotten that the wire was cut.

But an instant later, he was out of his mental fog. The bell was ringing somewhere back of Carfax's office. It sounded behind a door that Aleck had assumed was another closet.

It wasn't. The plain wooden door opened into a tiny, private room in which was a desk, a chair and a small filing cabinet. There was a telephone on the desk.

Aleck snatched up the receiver.

CHAPTER III.

A QUEEN CHANGES.

CARRIE CASHIN received no warning of attack. Less than two minutes after her tightly bandaged body had been placed within the mummy case of the Black Queen, she felt unseen hands clutch at her. Overbalanced, she fell backward. A powerful grip prevented her from crashing to the floor. Staring through the tiny peepholes over her wrapped eyes, she could see two ugly-faced men glaring at her.

The glow of a flashlight told her that she was lying inside a tunnel-like passage. Carrie realized at once that she was inside the thick museum wall.

The faces of the two men withdrew. A woman's face glared fiercely down at Carrie. And what a woman! Merciless eyes that blazed with bright metallic flame. Jet-black hair worn in the ancient fashion of the queens of Egypt. An ivory scepter in one clenched hand, a golden asp in the other. And a body that was so starkly beautiful under filmy drapes that Carrie almost forgot the bitter evil in the woman's stony smile.

The next instant the Black Queen vanished.

Carrie was picked up by the two men. They carried her upside down. But she was aware that her helpless body was being borne down steps and shoved through another wall panel. She was slid over a window-sill and dropped to soft turf. She landed on her back with a jarring thump. Through her pinhole sights, she had a blurred glimpse of a parked sedan. The two kidnapers thrust her in the rear of the car and covered her with a rug.

Then there was a long delay. Carrie fancied she heard a man groan, but she wasn't sure. She tried desperately to move her right hand. There was a knife in it, but she hadn't calculated on the cruel tightness of the mummy wrappings. Her hand and arm were numb. And the heat inside the bandages was almost unbearable. She was bathed in perspiration.

She knew now that the woman with the flaming eyes was human. Unlike Aleck, Carrie's mind could not be diverted by make-believe. She had made a swift observation and a swifter deduction in the few seconds she had gazed into the burning eyes of the fake Asnara.

Suddenly, the sedan began to move. It curved along what was evidently a circular driveway, then it swung onto smoother pavement. Its speed increased. The street could only be Fifth Avenue. But whether the flight was north or south, Carrie had no way of discovering.

She tried again and again to move her paralyzed fingers that held the knife. Useless! She gave up the struggle, finally.

The automobile drive was a long one. It ended with a sharp turn into what felt like a long and bumpy dirt lane. Carrie was slid from the sedan to the sloping lawn in the rear of a large house. The house seemed to be set in the midst of dark, spacious grounds.

Carrie was lugged through a rear door and up thickly carpeted stairs.

She was thrown heavily to a sofa. Strong hands began to rip the tight layers of bandage from her head. The man was the ex-museum attendant called Sam. He didn't stop when he had uncovered Carrie's face and throat. A vicious grin twisted his lips when he saw that the captured girl was dressed only in silken fleshings. He began to unwind the bandages toward the curve of her bosom.

"That's enough, Sam!" a woman cried sharply. "I'll handle this smart dame myself."

THE woman was still dressed exactly as Carrie had seen her for a blinding instant at the museum. She seemed utterly indifferent to her near nudity in the presence of the two henchmen. Her eyes glared balefully at Carrie. But Carrie's voice was fearless.

"Don't you think it's about time to remove your black wig and the rest of your make-believe, Mrs. Carfax?"

The woman's breath hissed. Then she laughed. Her laughter was ugly. She ripped off the wig, disclosing honey-colored blond hair. A sponge from a near-by table wiped the black paste from brows and eyelashes.

"And those sequins you've got pasted on your eyelids," Carrie added steadily. "You might as well take those off, too. I happen to know the truth."

"Exactly how much *do* you know?" Ethel Carfax said in a purring whisper.

Carrie explained very slowly in an effort to gain time. She had known the fake Asnara was an actress the moment she had seen the sequins. Only an actress would have thought of pasting sequins on her eyelids to reflect the glitter of flame. And the fact that the woman was completely indifferent to her semi-nudity in the presence of two men was further proof. Only an actress, used to the scanty attire worn in musical comedies, would have disregarded her rather daring costume.

"To identify the actress as Mrs. Ronald Carfax was simple," Carrie continued slowly. "I never take a case without preliminary investigation. I learned before I went to the museum tonight that the curator of Egyptology had a pretty blond wife, much younger than he, who was on the stage before he married her. By the way, don't you think you were dangerously foolish to take me to *your own home* in Riverdale-on-the-Hudson?"

Ethel Carfax gasped. For an instant, she was mystified by Carrie's shrewd knowledge. Then she saw the direction of the girl's gaze. There was a silver tankard on a low table near the wall. The tankard was engraved with the initials "E. C."

Ethel Carfax's laughter was throaty, menacing.

"There's one other advantage in

my being an actress," she said. "I'll prove that to you in two minutes." She glared at the two thugs. "Shove a gag on this dame while I change to something more comfortable for a boat ride."

Her slightly clad body vanished from the room.

WHEN she returned, she was wearing a chic woolen outfit of sport clothes. Carrie had no time to speculate on the meaning of the woman's remark about a boat ride. Ethel Carfax's words were jeering, as she said:

"I'm going to telephone your stupid friend Aleck at the museum and bring him out here. He's probably still there. He'll be glad to hear your nice soft voice. Like this, for instance——"

Her harsh voice changed. It became an exact duplicate of the soft, pleasant tones of Carrie herself. The woman's power of mimicry was marvelous. Had Carrie shut her eyes, she would have been convinced that she herself was talking.

Ethel Carfax leaped to the phone and called a number. There was a long, nerve-racking wait; then she slammed down the receiver with a shrill oath.

"There's no answer from my husband's office," she frowned. "Operator says there's something wrong with the wire."

Her face cleared suddenly. She darted to the phone and called the same exchange with a different number.

"I forgot about the extra phone in the inner office," she muttered.

Again she became Carrie Cashin in every modulation of her counterfeit voice.

"Aleck! . . . Thank God. I hoped I'd get you! Don't talk, please. Listen! I've been kidnaped. They took me to a house in Riverdale. I managed to free myself, and I've got them helpless under my gun muzzle. Rush out here right away —quick as you can!"

She gave swift directions of the shortest route to take.

"Follow the dirt lane to the rear of the house. You can tell the room by the rose glow of the lamp on the second floor. The window is open and there's a water pipe that should be easy to climb. Come in fast through that window. And Aleck, darling—hurry!"

She hung up. She waited five breathless minutes. Then, again, she called the same number. This time her voice was her own.

"Ronald, darling? . . . This is Ethel. Has that dumb dick left the museum? . . . Swell!" Her voice crackled. "You better get started right away! You've got a long trip up the river to get to the cruiser. I'll let you have the pleasure of killing this nosey female dick and her dumb boy-friend!"

CARRIE heard the panting breath below the window. The scrape of Aleck's climbing feet on the pipe was clearly audible; but she had no way to warn him. She had been gagged from the grim moment when Ethel Carfax had imitated her voice on the telephone.

Sam and the dark-faced George stood tensely on either side of the window, their clubbed guns ready for Aleck's skull to wriggle inward across the sill.

But an accident happened. There was a sudden cry outside, then the sound of a body crashing to the turf behind the house. Aleck had lost his grip on the vertical pipe. He had fallen heavily.

George peered cautiously; then he grinned.

"The sap is out cold. I can see his foot sticking from behind a bush."

"Slide down that pipe and bat him on the skull before he recovers," Ethel Carfax snapped.

George vanished over the sill. Carrie could hear him grunt as he descended. She tried not to think of Aleck.

Suddenly, George's voice shouted from below. There was rage in his cry. Puzzlement, too.

Sam leaned out the window. "What's the matter?"

"He ain't here! Just his empty shoe! That flop of his was a fake. The sucker pulled a gag on us."

"You people are the suckers!" a crisp voice said from an inner doorway. "Get those hands up or I'll drill you."

IT was Aleck, standing just inside the threshold of the room. One of his shoes was missing. There was a heavy gun in his hand. Ethel Carfax screamed. Sam whirled from the window sill, but one look at Aleck's gun was enough. He let his weapon fall to the floor. There was no sound from the man down below.

"We'll have to take a chance on that other guy," Aleck growled to Carrie.

He was crouched beside the tightly bandaged girl, a knife in his free hand. His gun kept the others rigid.

In an instant, Carrie's gag was gone. The knife point dug gently through the wrappings on her body. Aleck ripped the point downward. Carrie felt pain and a warm trickle of blood, but she didn't mind that. She was free of restraint, rising unsteadily to her feet. Clad only in the silken fleshings she had worn inside the mummy bandages, she staggered drunkenly behind a velvet drape as if she were ashamed to have Aleck see her.

There was a heavy pound of feet along the hallway. George had re-entered the house and was racing back to the attack. At the same instant, Ethel Carfax remembered something she had forgotten. Her voice screeched triumphantly:

"Take him, Sam! George—grab him! I forgot about his damned gun. It's loaded with blanks!"

As they sprang, Aleck fired. But the flame of his shots didn't stop their rush. Aleck remembered how he and the dead Denslow had fired in vain at the fake Egyptian queen. No need to wonder about that now! Their guns had been tampered with!

He fought fiercely. He managed to slug Sam with his fist. But Carfax's wife sank her teeth into his forearm, and the next instant George struck at him like a pile driver. The gun butt sent a gush of flame whirling through Aleck's skull. The flame faded into black nothingness that——

ETHEL CARFAX darted to the velvet drape behind which Carrie Cashin had vanished. There was no sign of the plucky girl. An open window behind the drape showed where Carrie had gone. She had taken a chance on a daring leap into the dark tangle of bushes below.

With an oath, George raced from the room.

"Head her off at the road!" Ethel Carfax cried. "She's hurt. She can't get far. When you grab her, bring her down to the speedboat."

Sam picked up the unconscious Aleck. He slung him over his shoulder. He followed the woman down the stairs and out the back door.

The ground in the rear of the house sloped toward the Hudson. It was heavily wooded and the river itself was invisible behind trees and shrubbery. Ethel Carfax raced ahead of the panting Sam. Aleck was no easy weight to carry.

It was Ethel Carfax who encountered George. The thug was crouched behind a bush, halfway toward the river, his gun a menacing blur in the darkness.

Ethel Carfax cursed him fiercely when she realized he was alone.

"Where's the girl? I told you to grab her before she reached the road in front of the house."

"She didn't go that way," George growled. "She ran straight toward the river. Look—there's her footprints!"

He added, harshly:

"Why the hell should she run for the river?"

"To steal our boat, you fool! Come on!"

The footprints led straight to a sandy bench. They vanished at the edge of the black water.

Ethel Carfax laughed with grim relief.

"The little fool is going to try to swim the Hudson. She'll either drown—or we'll pick her up in the speedboat. Come on! Over to the jetty, and get that boat under way!"

CHAPTER IV.

A CORPSE RETURNS.

CARRIE CASHIN was in the Hudson, but she was in no danger of drowning. She was standing in water that was barely five feet deep.

Her race to the beach was a ruse. She knew the conspirators were planning to take a boat ride. Ethel Carfax's incautious words back in the house had told her that.

The moment Carrie entered the water, she waded as fast as she could to the tiny jetty where the speedboat was moored. Its stern was partly under the jetty and Carrie was able to slide aboard like a dripping mermaid. She was tired and weak, but she had no time to worry about herself. She knew that Aleck's life depended on her wit and her nerve.

She found a coil of light rope and slid noiselessy back into the water. She tied one end of the rope tightly about her waist and studied the squat stern of the boat. There was a ringbolt there, but it didn't help Carrie's plans any. She knew that a taut rope astern would warn the crooks that they were towing a stowaway fifty feet behind them. They wouldn't see the tiny patch of foam her body would make, but they'd notice the rope.

Carrie had a better hunch. She took a deep breath and submerged. She found, as she had hoped, that the propeller of the speedboat was enclosed in a cagelike housing to protect the blades from driftwood and floating débris. She tied the free end of her line to the rear bar of the propeller cage. She worked carefully, staying underwater until her lungs nearly burst. Then she took a deep breath and waded behind one of the jetty's dark timbers.

She waited, motionless, until the boat started. She let it go nearly two-thirds the length of the fifty-foot line before she kicked herself horizontal and started to swim. Even so, the jerk of the rope underwater nearly tore her apart. She gritted her teeth. Her head was the only part of her above the surface. The patch of foam she made was merely a tiny blur of white in a vast enveloping darkness.

The boat made quick zigzags and circles. It covered every foot of the river that fronted the tiny beach. At the end of her long rope, Carrie kept her head under water as much as possible. Then, abruptly, the speedboat quit the vain search. The crooks had evidently decided that the exhausted girl had drowned.

A MILE or two up the river, the speedboat veered swiftly toward the shaggy blackness of the Palisades, on the Jersey side. A motor cruiser was anchored there. It was a trim sixty-foot craft, with fore and aft cabins. There was no light above deck. Every porthole was black.

The speedboat slid under a short accommodation ladder on the port side. Carrie swam noiselessly under water. She came up beneath the squat stern of the speedboat.

Ethel Carfax's cry was low, but clearly distinct: "Are you aboard, darling?"

No answer came from the dark cruiser. There was a quick consultation among the crooks, then they began climbing the ladder. Carrie, watching unseen, felt a thrill of relief as she saw Aleck stumble upward between George and Sam. He looked bloody and groggy, but he was no longer unconscious.

George forced Aleck below into the aft cabin. Ethel Carfax followed. She left Sam on deck.

"Keep your eye astern!" she ordered. "He should be along any minute now. But make sure it's him. If any stranger shows up—yell!"

Carrie Cashin untied the light rope that still attached her body to the propeller housing of the speedboat. She swam slowly around the cruiser's stern, her submerged hands and feet making no splashes under the black surface of the river. She reached the starboard side of the cruiser's bow.

An anchor hung there, its flukes barely two feet above the water. Carrie didn't attempt to kick upward and clutch for it. She knew the splashing would attract Sam's attention. Instead, she made a running noose in the free end of her rope. She lassoed the anchor fluke and drew the line tight. It was a short climb and she ascended, hand over hand, without sound.

Her dripping, silken-clad body was as sleek as a seal's, as she slid over the shadowy peak of the bow. Flat on her stomach, she let her eyes search calmly for what she needed. She located a handspike and began to crawl slowly aft.

Sam was squatted lazily on a coil of rope, staring astern down the black river. Occasionally, his glance moved toward the short ladder where the moored speedboat bobbed quietly.

He had no warning until the handspike struck him. Carrie caught him before he hit the deck. She took his gun and covered his limp body with a tarpaulin. Then, with scarcely a pause, she yanked off Sam's trousers and unbuttoned his coat.

THE trousers were a mile too big for Carrie, but she pulled the belt tight on her slim waist and rolled up the legs. She did the same with the dangling sleeves of the coat. There was a pleased smile on her lips. For the first time that night, she felt decently dressed!

She crept down the aft companion. The cabin door was partly opened. She could see George's back and the snout of his extended gun. His gun was pointed at Aleck. Aleck was sitting on the edge of the lower of two bunks. His hands were spread-eagled high above his head. On the upper bunk Ethel Carfax was reaching out with a pair of handcuffs to clamp Aleck's wrists to a horizontal metal stanchion.

"Stick 'em up!" Carrie said crisply.

George whirled. He saw death in Carrie's brown eyes and dropped his weapon. But Ethel Carfax was made of deadlier stuff. She threw the handcuffs at Carrie's head. Unable to duck the sudden missile, Carrie felt a smashing impact against her forehead. She staggered backward, and George dived for his fallen gun.

Aleck took care of that. He left the bunk like a bullet. There was a fierce struggle, the crash of a shot, then George collapsed with a blue hole in his neck.

CARRIE had her hands full with Ethel Carfax. The woman fought like a fiend. It took both detectives to subdue her. Carrie clicked the handcuffs on her wrists. Aleck tied her kicking legs. A gag stopped her frantic screaming.

Aleck started to ask an amazed question. But Carrie spoke first.

"Tell me everything that happened to you since I was shoved in that darned sarcophagus in the museum. I want to hear *every detail.*"

When Aleck finished, Carrie smiled grimly.

"I thought so! I've suspected so right from the start."

"Carfax's due here any minute," Aleck nodded. "I'm just dying to get my hands on——"

Carrie's palm clapped suddenly over Aleck's lips. Someone was hailing the cruiser from the dark river outside. A moment later the tread of feet sounded on deck. The feet hurried toward the companion of the aft cabin.

Carrie's calm lips brushed Aleck's ear for a throbbing instant.

"You're wrong," she whispered. "Not Mrs. Carfax's husband! Her lover!"

The next instant a man sprang into the room. He had a gun in one hand and a leather brief case in the other. Aleck yelled with amazement. He couldn't help it. He was staring at a dead man! Denslow, the assistant curator at the museum!

Carrie's quick shot was all that saved the startled Aleck's life. Her bullet drilled Denslow through the thigh, toppling him at the instant his gun flamed. The diverted slug whistled past Aleck's temple, singeing his hair.

Denslow rolled over on his side. He tried to shoot Carrie, as she bent over him to grab his gun. But Aleck kicked him in the head and that took all the fight out of Denslow. Aleck tossed the brief case out of his way as he started to lug the groaning man toward one of the bunks.

"I wouldn't ignore that brief case, if I were you," Carrie said tonelessly. "I think you'll find a pretty fair imitation of a gold mine inside it."

SHE was right. Packed neatly away in the leather pockets was a royal ransom—the entire collection of Queen Asnara's historic gems, stolen from the museum.

"That death act of Denslow's was a cunning fake," Carrie said slowly. She sounded tired. When Denslow threw up his arm in pretended terror, he undoubtedly swallowed a capsule. I don't know what drug he used to turn his face blue and produce temporary catalepsy—but to a man with his knowledge of ancient Egypt, the drug stunt must have been fairly easy."

"But——" Aleck gasped.

"Those jewels weren't stolen tonight. The robbery took place *last night,* when the watchman was frightened away. The thing that ruined Ethel Carfax and her lover was the fact that Carfax insisted on calling in detectives. The crooks feared the robbery would be discovered. So they staged a second ghost scene in order to rivet suspicion on the husband.

"That's why Denslow pretended to be murdered. That's why the phone wire was cut. That's why Denslow's body disappeared. He had to escape with the loot—and the faithless wife of his friend. The trick was to make it look as though Carfax had killed both Denslow and his wife, and buried them somewhere. I'll bet a pair of new lace panties that the police will find copies of Carfax's fingerprints all over the inside of that glass jewel case. Luckily, we have the gems and the real crooks to set the police right."

"You say you suspected Denslow from the start?" Aleck asked.

"Yes. When they wrapped me up in those confounded mummy bandages, one of those two curators pulled the wrappings so tight across my right hand and arm that I was unable to use the knife I took to free myself. The foxy Mr. Denslow did that!"

There was silence for a moment. Then Carrie herself asked a question. She was completely puzzled. For the first time in her experience, Aleck had done something amazingly smart for which Carrie could find no logical answer.

"When Mrs. Carfax called you over the telephone," she said gently, "her imitation of my voice was so good that it fooled even me. Yet you knew that call was a fake. You came prepared for trouble. How the dickens did you know?

Aleck flushed. Then he laughed.

"A cinch—that is, for anyone who knows you as well as I do. Ethel Carfax said: *'Hurry—Aleck darling!'* You never called me 'darling' in your life!"

Carrie Cashin's brown eyes twinkled. There was a sweet, smiling curve on her lips, as she murmured:

"You're a darned swell guy—*darling.*"

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WMSD—Sheffield, Ala.
KELD—Eldorado, Ark.
KIUP—Durango, Colo.
KFXJ—Grand Junction, Col.
KGHF—Pueblo, Colo.
WMFJ—Daytona Beach, Fla.
WRDW—Augusta, Ga.
WAYX—Waycross, Ga.
KSEI—Pocatello, Idaho.
KTFI—Twin Falls, Idaho
WMBD—Peoria, Ill.
WCBS—Springfield, Ill.
WREN—Lawrence, Kan.
KALB—Alexandria, La.
WJBO—Baton Rouge, La.
WLBZ—Bangor, Me.

STATION CITY
WIBM—Jackson, Mich.
WJDX—Jackson, Miss.
WAML—Laurel, Miss.
KGVO—Missoula, Mont.
KGEZ—Kalispell, Mont.
KMOX—St. Louis, Mo.
KFVS—Cape Girardeau, Mo.
WSNJ—Bridgeton, N. J.
KGKY—Scotts Bluff, Neb.
KAWM—Gallup, N. M.
WGNY—Newburgh, N. Y.
WFBL—Syracuse, N. Y.
WSJS—Winston-Salem, N. C.
WWNC—Asheville, N. C.
WSOC—Charlotte, N. C.
WDAY—Fargo, N. D.
KVSO—Ardmore, Okla.
KMED—Medford, Ore.
KOOS—Marshfield, Ore.

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WJAC—Johnstown, Pa.
WORK—York, Pa.
KABR—Aberdeen, S. D.
WMC—Memphis, Tenn.
KFDM—Beaumont, Texas.
KRLD—Dallas, Texas.
KNOW—Austin, Texas.
KABC—San Antonio, Texas.
KNET—Palestine, Texas.
KRGV—Weslaco, Texas.
KDYL—Salt Lake City, Utah.
WLVA—Lynchburg, Va.
WCAX—Burlington, Vt.
WNBX—Springfield, Vt.
KXRO—Aberdeen, Wash.
WIBU—Beaver Dam, Wis.
WRJN—Racine, Wis.
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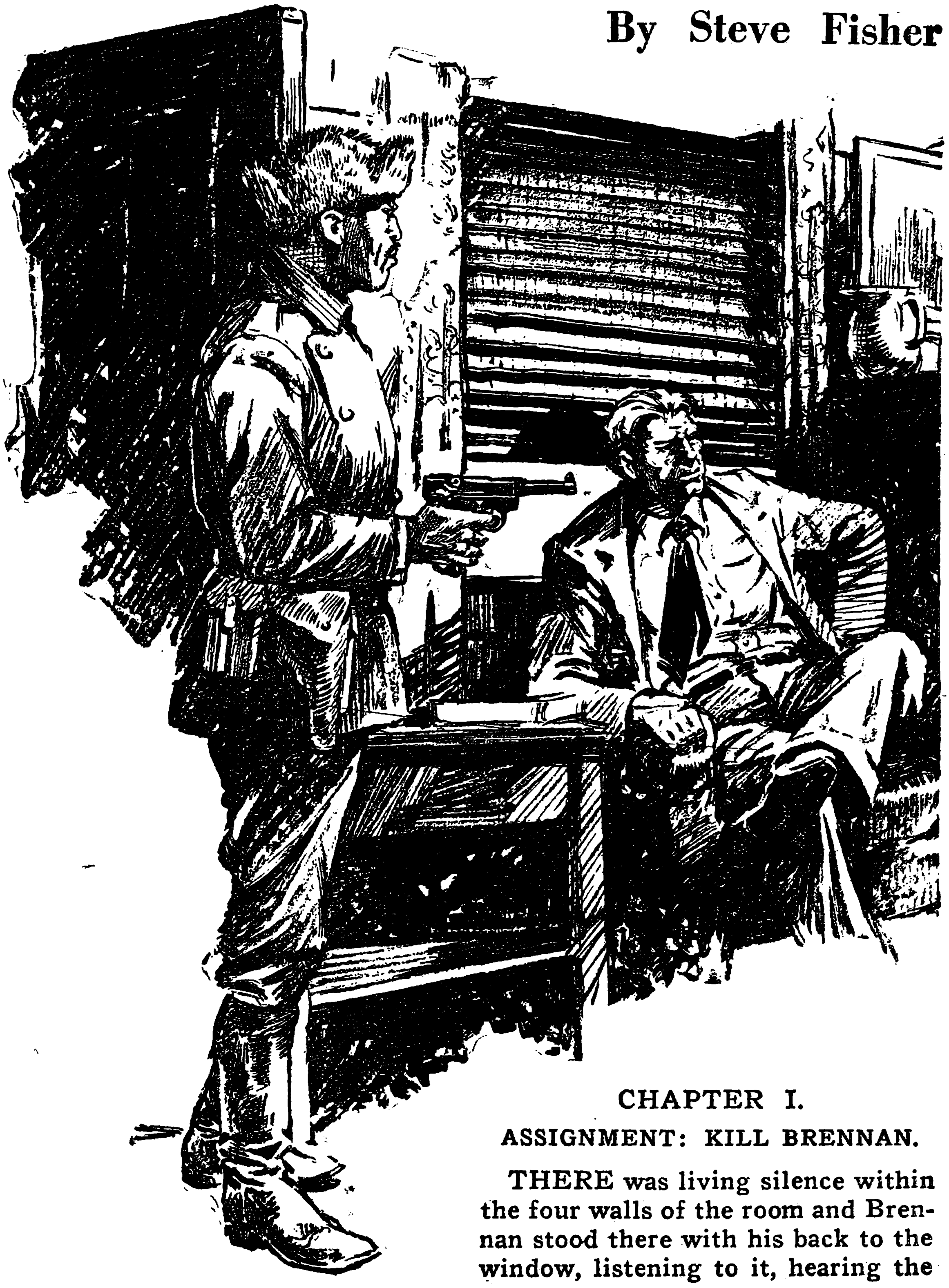
SHANGHAI

A Naval Intelligence story

By Steve Fisher



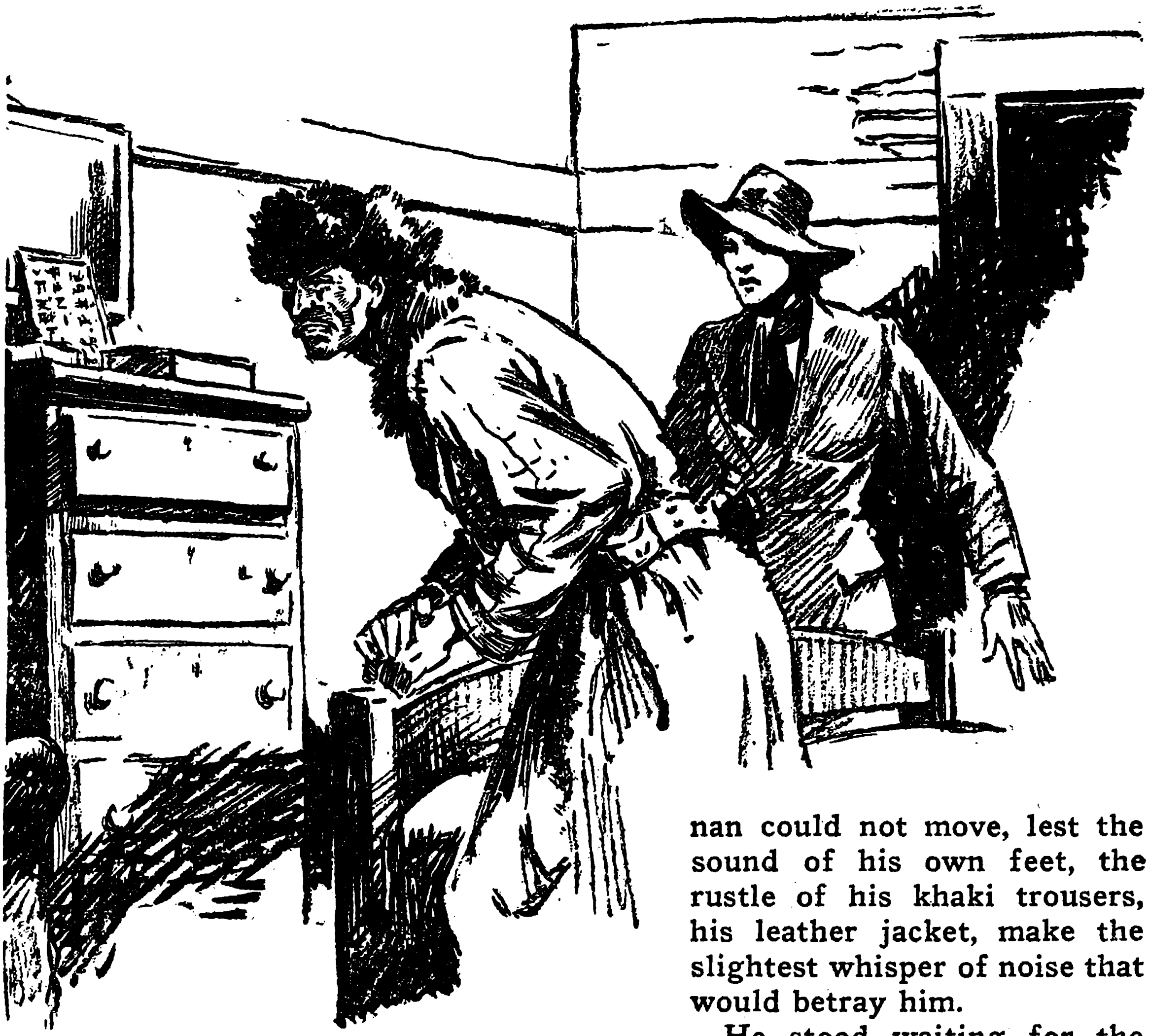
CHAPTER I.

ASSIGNMENT: KILL BRENNAN.

THERE was living silence within the four walls of the room and Brennan stood there with his back to the window, listening to it, hearing the

RENEGADE

In war-torn China, Big Red Brennan meets a pretty girl—and also his own double—in a double-crossing game of death!



unseen presence of some one, conscious of his own soft breathing, the cold steel of the gun that pressed its butt into the thick palm of his hand. Death was waiting here for him, crouching in the unseen depth of the room. It was kill, or be killed; yet he knew not which way to turn. He was only aware that the other man was in the room—but he had no idea of his location.

For that reason, "Big Red" Brennan could not move, lest the sound of his own feet, the rustle of his khaki trousers, his leather jacket, make the slightest whisper of noise that would betray him.

He stood waiting for the other man to give some clue to where he was hiding. And standing like this, Brennan's ears were so acute and strained for sounds in the room that he seemed to hear past to-day; he seemed to pick up the sounds of yesterdays, and all the years that stretched beyond yesterday, when this room had been one of many in a high-class hotel, the clientele of which Shanghai had boasted.

It was empty now, all of its three

hundred rooms were empty, the place a little more than a shambles. Its steel structure was a mockery against the flaring red of Shanghai's night sky. A few poor rooms were intact, the rest in ruins.

And standing here, where he was to meet death, or give death, Big Red Brennan listened to yesterday; tuned in to the vibrations and atmosphere and glow that even war could not rob from the room—the laughter, perhaps, of a pretty girl; the soft crying of a schoolteacher ordered to evacuate; the plotting venality of an international spy; the wonder and amazement of a marine officer freshly transferred here from the States; the cackle of a shrill old woman; the putttering, grunting of an old man.

Millionaires, fakes and thieves. Only God and these walls knew whom the room had sheltered in its existence, in its heyday service as a hotel suite.

And now, perhaps, its last chapter:

THE duel of wits and lives between Big Red Brennan of the American Naval Intelligence, assigned to break up the biggest ring of United States spies since his country's existence of military representation in the Orient, and Sam Kum Chee, Chinese extraordinary, international spy, right lieutenant in the spy ring Brennan had been ordered to break. Sam Kum Chee, wily, fast, a sharpshooter, a knifer-in-the-back, an American-educated Chinese, hiding now in this room with his own assignment—the grim order to kill Red Brennan!

Two great men at opposite poles; two heavy guns held ready. Death waiting in the darkness to claim one man.

Then, suddenly, from somewhere down the street, there was the shattering explosion of a bomb. A small, flat building of two stories shattered like a thick bubble, the bricks flying out in all directions, for a moment a complete circle of flying débris; and then, the lead hailstorm clattering onto the street, killing people, squashing out lives, breaking human heads.

It was like the bombing of a small movie set, grotesque and unreal, too horrible for sane comprehension. And in the very first second the red light of the explosion had pressed outward, traveling in a sweeping light wave, flashing past the darkened window of the hotel like a searchlight.

The glass in the window behind Brennan broke. He heard it tinkle, and he was aware that the red light made his huge figure a grim silhouette within the room: the officer's cap, cocked to the side of his head; the lines of his square jaw; his cheek bones which jutted; even the thickness of his lips.

When the light died, it was too late. Sam Kum Chee had leaped from his place squealing, his gun cracking in a staccato voice to drown out San Kum Chee's own human sound.

Stinging lead through the hip, then reeling backward, not even time for Brennan's muscle reaction. His own gun fumbled in his hand, his huge body hit the floor and his head banged up against the wall. Sam Kum Chee, knowing exactly his position from the sound, standing over him now, his gun streaking a tongue of angry red, exploding like dynamite in his hand. The faint light outlined his round Oriental face, the slitted eyes, the sweat coming like grease down his yellow cheeks. A study in saffron: thin lips, uneven teeth, glowing eyes—a steady gun hand. Beyond that, no expression.

THE movement of Brennan's head saved his life. Two bullets stung the wall not an inch from his right ear; and then he was hurling himself forward, tackling Sam Kum Chee around his legs, pressing, so that the Chinese went over backward, hitting hard on the floor with a thump that jarred the room.

His hip bleeding, Big Red Brennan crawled up over the Chinese. Sam Kum Chee, expert at jujutsu, lifted his knees, jerked at Brennan's wrist, threw him off and scrambled to get to his feet.

Brennan was equally fast. His life depended on it. He drew quick breaths, was up, spreading his legs to support himself, grappling for his own gun which had twisted in his hand, into which he had tangled his fingers. A shot from Sam Kum Chee's weapon screamed out at him; and then Brennan had straightened his automatic. He was firing.

Wham! Wham!

Then silence—— Now the sucking, muffled sound of something hitting the floor, a sigh—a moan—a long, heavy breath. Silence——

Big Red stood there, his legs still spread, the gun still in his hand, smoking now, red-hot. He wiped sweat from his face, breathed the haunting darkness of the hotel room. Sam Kum Chee, first lieutenant in a gang of international spies which included several crooked American navy men, was dead. Sam Kum Chee was lying there on the floor with Brennan's bullets in him.

Big Red Brennan's assignment had just begun.

CHAPTER II.

THE RENEGADE MONGOLIAN.

BRENNAN stooped there in the darkness and searched Sam Kum Chee's cooling body.

There was nothing but a wallet, which Brennan stuffed in his own pocket. He rose again, paused to put a cigarette in his mouth and light it. The beating of his heart, which had increased when the gunfire began, was calming; and the wound in his hip was already half numb. The blood no longer flowed. There was the chance of infection, but Brennan—in a city that was ravaged with war and people who were dying—had no time to bother with first aid for himself.

He had lured Sam Kum Chee here to discover important information. He had known the Chinese was working for the spy ring he wanted to break, and it had occurred to Brennan that, for a price, Sam Kum Chee would do a little double-crossing on his own tribe. That was the first way you tried working on a case: the stool-pigeon—or "tattletale" method, whether you were a city cop or an Intelligence man in China. For all over the world the same methods were used.

But Sam Kum Chee, ordered—as Brennan had later discovered—to kill Brennan because of the fact Big Red was assigned to the case and his reputation was sufficient to throw a scare into the ring, had first agreed to meet Brennan here and sell information for a good price. But then when Brennan arrived, a matter of a few minutes ago, the Chinese had been lying in ambush for him, ready to kill him. Sam Kum Chee would not double-cross his own outfit. He had used Brennan's offer only to get him here so that he might murder him.

The trouble now was that in handing Brennan the case to solve, Washington, D. C.'s only lead—as reported from another agent—was that Sam Kum Chee was the first lieutenant. There was nothing beyond that. There was, in fact, only a blank wall which Brennan must now penetrate.

Big Red moved quietly to the door. He dropped his cigarette and stepped on it, then he left the room.

HE climbed down the weak, battered steps, holding to the half-wrecked banister; he stepped over bodies in the lobby, finally emerged onto the street. Chinese were fleeing, screaming—— Some of them had their chickens and their goats and their pigs. Little babies of brownish Oriental hue toddled along, crying, sobbing, reaching out for mothers or fathers who had long ago vanished.

In the distance there was the sound of gunfire—bombs—a dull, roaring thunder, a city half in flames, filled with looters, thieves. Now and again a frightened white man slid through the reddish haze of light that glowed on the cobblestones of the street.

Brennan moved along with the crowd, toward the International Settlement. A white Russian girl, her pale face overemphasized with rouge, ran squarely into him. *"You a white man? Marry me so I can get out! There's no escape—no evacuation for white Russians. Marry me so I can get a passport and get out——"* Screaming shrilly, hysterically, she brushed on, running through the streets. Big Red shook his head and continued walking.

He moved through the huge iron gates of the International Settlement. Chinese stood outside in great packs, begging, crying to get in. Once inside it was quieter, though the tumult outside the gates still beat against his eardrums. He found a small, decent restaurant, and entered. He passed the glittering white bar, where men and women drank, and laughed so that they might forget the death that rose in a wall about them.

Big Red eased his body into a small booth and sat there, Sam Kum Chee's wallet on the table before him. A waiter arrived.

"Coffee," Brennan said; then: "Black, mister. Black as the devil." His voice was raw, hoarse, and it seems to come from deep in his throat. His eyes were a glowing brownish-red, in contrast with his short-clipped hair; his face was tanned and hard.

When the coffee came, he turned his attention to the wallet.

A few minutes later he had singular information, but he was momentarily confused by its presentment.

ARNOLD WHITE, lieutenant of the Shanghai Naval Shore Station, was head of the international spy gang. There was no other news, not another single clue. The spy gang was large; its names numbered into twenty or thirty. Big Red had the name of only one: the leader. To arrest Lieutenant Arnold White would be utterly ridiculous, and Brennan knew it.

Lieutenant White would be so protected that no evidence would be found on him, in his home, or in his office. No court martial would be able to prove the charge of espionage against him. Further, no amount of grilling or third degree would make White talk, and thus involve the other members. This Brennan knew from past experience.

It was an odd situation. He knew the most guilty of the whole lot, and yet he could do nothing about it.

"Up a tree," he whispered to himself. "He's so protected that even if I formally challenged him, he could have me disciplined for malicious slander!"

Big Red smiled grimly to himself. A course lay open to him: the old, the devious, the tried-and-true course of shadowing Arnold White, following him all over Shanghai, watching his activities, checking up on his sources.

But that would take time, and more than one man—for no man could go forever without sleep. He would have to have a relief watch. Further, this old method was full of peril, loopholes; there was no assurance that in the end, perhaps weeks and weeks later when sufficient evidence was gathered, Arnold White would not in some way be able to slip out of it legally. And by that time, more damage would be done by the spies.

Brennan discarded the old method. He needed a new one. A plan by which he could get both the goods on White and the whole gang at the same time. But how could this be accomplished? He had to work lightning fast. He had to crack the case almost overnight, if he was to stop sabotage, the leakage of naval plans to foreign governments. But how, single-handed, could he do this?

Big Red Brennan had experience in every sort of intelligence work. He had been ace, the victor in more than twenty cases; and yet none had presented a problem so difficult as this.

For more than an hour he sat at the table drinking coffee, going over every possible angle to the situation. When he finally rose, he had decided on his course of action. His ultimate decision seemed easy, now that the complete plan was formulated. The entire axis of his further movement swung on the one point: Sam Kum Chee, Lieutenant White's first lieutenant. Sam Kum Chee was now dead, and White would need *another* first lieutenant. Obviously, if Big Red himself could get this job, he would soon—and damned soon—come across evidence to convict White and the rest of the spy ring.

Brennan was personally acquainted with Lieutenant White, however; had reported to him when he came to Shanghai. They were on friendly terms with one another, or had been, to all surface appearance. So Brennan could not take the rôle of first lieutenant in the guise of himself. That was out. Impossible. But there was another way in which he might get the job.

He left the restaurant and headed toward the naval shore station——

WHITE sat behind his desk. He seemed old at thirty—his face bleached, beyond tan; his gray eyes tired, with rings under them. He had blond hair, heavy cheeks, a thick jaw. His uniform was loose on him in spite of his large body.

"I hope you have been progressing in your assignment to wipe out the spies, Brennan," White said. He said it softly, casually, but it was actually a question rather than a remark. Arnold White, the crafty thinking machine of his brain hidden behind the white of his skin, was asking over and over: Why is it Brennan isn't dead; why hasn't Sam Kum Chee killed him? *Where is*

Sam Kum Chee; has anything gone wrong? Brennan read these thoughts in Lieutenant White's expressionless eyes, though White had, aloud, said only: "I hope you have been progressing in your assignment to wipe out the spies."

"As a matter of fact," Big Red replied, "I just killed a fellow named Sam Kum Chee."

"What?" White started forward.

"I said I——"

"I heard what you—ah—said." White rested back, again in posession of himself. "Did you—ah—find out anything?"

"Unfortunately," said Brennan, "we were on a roof, and Sam Kum Chee's body toppled off the edge when I shot him. By the time I got to the street, there had been an explosion—a Jap bomb or something—and I was unable to find the corpse."

White breathed easier.

"But I've another lead," Brennan went on.

"You—you have?"

BRENNAN nodded. "There's a big Mongolian in town. He's probably the most dangerous man alive. I understand that in his time he's been war lord of a Chinese army—a commissar in a rebel Russian outfit, they say he's formed entire spy units all by himself and run them. He's smart as a whip, a fighter that no ten men can beat. He has a reputation of having killed—assassinated emperors and kings. Frankly, White, he's hell on wheels all by himself. A big, strapping Mongolian, as sleek as all China, and twice as brilliant. They say he's on the loose at the present—— You know, a Shanghai renegade, looking around for a soft spot."

Arnold White rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You don't say?"

"I do," Brennan insisted. "As I say, the report is that this Mongolian is at present a renegade. But I have an idea that he's the head of the very spy ring I'm trying to crack."

"Hm-m-m," said White.

Brennan rose. "I'm trying to get a lead on the Mongolian now. But it doesn't seem much use. He's oily—smooth as the honey from a female bee. So for to-night, at least, I think I'll go to my hotel and rest up. I'm tired, worn out, and a man has to sleep sometime."

White also rose. "Well, I—I shall probably see you later."

Brennan thought: "Quite probably, old man. Oh, quite!" But aloud, he said: "I don't know. In the morning, I'll resume my watch on the Mongolian. He's staying at a crummy joint called the Locust House, and keeping a watch on him there takes up most of my time. Good-night."

"Ah—good-night," purred Arnold White.

Big Red let the door slam behind him. His lips moved in the faint trace of a smile. He'd have to hurry now, he told himself. Turning from a respectable white man into a half-savage Mongolian with a long "made-up" reputation would take time. Yet he had to make himself up as the Mongolian and get to the Locust House before Arnold White arrived.

Big Red had no doubt that from his description, White would make every attempt to replace the dead Sam Kum Chee with the "Shanghai Renegade" Mongolian.

"And from there we shall ride merrily on to hell," Brennan whispered.

CHAPTER III.

JOB FOR A KILLER.

HE sat in front of the mirror in the room he had rented in the disreputable Locust House and rubbed the heavy bronze paint into the pores of his skin. There was nothing safe about the place; it was liable at any moment to go up by a bomb, be so many fragments of wood and brick scattered along the already junk-piled streets. But that was the chance you took when you were in a country where there was war; and so Brennan tried not to think of the possibilities of a bomb. He must concentrate on his case, and his fingers must hurry in the appliance of make-up.

He looked into the mirror, saw his own jutting cheek bones, his skin a deep bronze—a gold color now; dirty apparently, a scar on his left cheek, a raw, red scar that had been affected—painted there.

He suddenly put away the bronze grease paint, opened a little black bag he had brought with him and brought out a jar of cream. This would gloss over the make-up and give it an appearance that would seem realistic. Also, it would prevent any chance of the make-up running, no matter whether Brennan sweated or swam in water. It was an invention—a formula which had come out of Hollywood; and Brennan, in his work in the Intelligence, never traveled without a complete make-up kit, and this cream to apply over all dark shades he had to put on his skin.

While he was putting this on he heard voices on the floor below him. They emanated from the hall downstairs.

He rose, put away the make-up, grabbed up the filthy garments he had picked from the body of a Chinese along the way; he climbed into these, strapped his automatic around his waist, then again gazed it himself in the cracked mirror. He looked around quickly, shocked at the sight; he looked around to see if there was actually a Mongolian in the room, or if it was himself that he was staring upon so intently. It was himself. The disguise was perfect.

There were footsteps on the stairs —— Now a knock on the door.

He cleared his throat, bellowed something in Mongolian, then strode to the door and opened it.

He stared, gulped at something in his throat, rubbed a hand across his eyes, as though he doubted this vision.

A LOVELY, dark-eyed girl stood there in the hall. She was slim, and shapely. Her clothes were neatly cut, white linen. She wore a pert hat, the brim of which dipped over one eye. The eyes were large, a dark brown, and the gaze in them was intent. Her skin was white, the contour of her face narrow, her mouth small. He saw too that she had long black hair done in a roll on the back of her neck.

"I—ah—— Do you speak English?" she said. Her voice was low and husky.

"Yes," said Brennan, "I speak English." He gloated over her in keeping with the character of the Mongolian.

"You are the man whose reputation——"

"My reputation stretches across the world," Brennan roared. "You have business to do with the great Chang, yes? Come in. Chang has never closed his door on the face of a woman so beautiful."

He realized that Arnold White

must have sent her; that she was another member of the spy ring which he was on his way to crack. This—sending the girl—had been an unexpected turn, however, for he had innocently believed that Lieutenant White would come in person. She must be brave, he thought, this girl must be very brave to obey an assignment to contact a Mongolian. And yet who—if not a girl—would be more apt to have success with a half-savage Oriental killer, such as Brennan had represented himself?

She moved into the room, closing the door, then leaning back against it. She seemed nervous.

"I suppose you are kept busy in these times of war, Mr. Chang?"

Brennan boomed: "Not so busy. You have a proposition for me? Every one comes to Chang with one proposition and another." He shrugged. "But me no can work on cheap jobs. Honorable uncle he take cheap jobs; now he work in Chinese laundry in San Francisco ironing shirt tails for politicians. Chang, he no fall into such filthy rut. Him make big money."

Half smiling, she quietly said: "I understand. Well—ah—I have a job for a killer."

Brennan looked at her sharply. "Me kill anybody that walk and talk," he said. "Draw only one line. Won't kill cripples in wheel chairs. Not honorable."

"This is work with a big organization," the girl went on. She spoke as though she were talking to a child. Brennan wanted it this way, so that she would go into detail and he would thereby gain more information.

"Big gang? Then me won't work unless me is chief." He walked the length of the room; lit a cigarette. "What is your name?"

"You may call me Dee," she said. "I—ah—— You can be *next to the chief* in this organization. I—that is, you and the chief will work together. The chief, of course, knows what must be done. The pay is very high. Five hundred dollars gold every week."

"Chief pay me five hundred gold every week just for little killing?" He laughed. "Japs do it for nothing."

Dee said: "But this is special killing. Some white men."

"Me kill white men with greatest of ease," replied Brennan. "Deal is on. When do I start?"

"Right away," she said. "Do you want to come with me?"

THEY made a picture in the streets of Shanghai: Brennan as a tattered, giant Mongolian; the slim, smart-looking girl. But people were too preoccupied with their own troubles to notice.

She led him into a second-rate hotel. They went, without speaking, to the second floor. She knocked, a signal knock, and the door was opened. Brennan saw a heavy-set Spaniard. "Leaves his own war to come to one over here," he said, at sight of him. He strode past the stranger.

Arnold White was sitting in a leather chair. He wore civilian clothes now; but these, like his uniform had been, were loose on him. His face seemed like varnish that was losing its color. His eyes were more hollow, much more deeply lined than they had been before.

"This is Chang," said the girl, introducing Brennan.

"How do you do?" said Arnold White.

Brennan turned to the girl. "Want me to kill him?"

"No! No!" she protested. *"This* is the chief."

That was what he wanted her to say, but he was playing the Mongolian in a blunt, stupid rôle.

Arnold White smiled, as though he were amused, and waved Brennan to sit down. "Take it easy, Chang," he said, "and I'll explain myself. I've heard of your fine reputation from a man—an American Intelligence officer—who has been on the lookout for you. He thinks you're mixed up in spy work, although it has been reported to him that you are at present a free-lance."

"Me free-lance," said Brennan.

"I THOUGHT you were, too," Arnold purred. "But these Intelligence men—— Well, they're a stupid lot; they get one idea in their head, and nothing changes it. Frankly, I have confidence in the reputation you are said to have. I myself run a quite large organization, the details of which will become clear to you after you have worked for me a month and I am sure I can trust you. Meanwhile, you will carry out my assignments."

"Sure," said Brennan. "Chang, he do anything for five hundred gold a week. Even shine shoes."

"That is good," Arnold White told him. "As I say, I was very impressed at your build-up. Sure that you would accept my very high offer, I have sent the news around Shanghai to my men that you are now in my employ, replacing a gentleman named Sam Kum Chee, who was also very adept at—shall we say—the art of slaying? These other men number forty in all. They are located in various parts of the city, and they will aid you on your various assignments for me. They are now all aware that the great Mongolian, the ex-war lord and chief is on their side. I—ah—read something about you, of course, before this Intelligence man told me about you."

Brennan knew what he meant. The rôle he had taken to get in Arnold White's employ (and things were working out beautifully!) was that of an actual Mongolian who existed somewhere on the face of Asia. Brennan knew little enough about the real Mongolian, but in the back of his mind had been these various newspaper stories about him, and he had therefore adopted the character when he found need for it.

"Only back in those days, when the newspapers were writing about you," White went on, "your name was not Chang. It was Ki Lee."

This startled Brennan only a little. He saw the girl sitting across the room, looked now at White. "True—true!" he boomed. "Me change to Chang. Sometimes not healthy to keep one name too long."

"Then you *are* Ki Lee?"

"Sure. Me great Ki Lee!"

A door to one of the other rooms opened. A huge Mongolian stood there with a gun gripped in his right hand. His eyes were burning with a black ebony, in which there was the very terror of hell. Brennan stared at him, conscious of Arnold White's voice droning.

"You lie, Chang. You are an impostor. That is Ki Lee there. He has been working for me for the past six months!"

From the door, Ki Lee said: "And I kill all other foolish Mongolians who intrude upon the regal dignity of my most honorable name." He spoke with what was an Oxford accent; and as the smooth words flowed from between his thick lips, he moved forward, the gun aimed at Big Red Brennan.

CHAPTER IV.

SPY HOUSE.

ONE thing Brennan realized at once: Although Arnold White had been wily enough to penetrate the trick and to lay a trap, he still was unaware that Big Red himself was behind the bronze make-up. He apparently believed that Brennan was a Mongolian, but one who had been working for the Naval Intelligence. He realized, too, that Ki Lee was going to kill him as that—as a Mongolian who had imposed upon his name.

His only recourse was to play the Mongolian character to the hilt; and since—as a Chinese—he had been shown up by the obviously sincere Ki Lee, he could do nothing but what a Mongolian in such a situation would do to save his own life.

He fell upon the floor, on his hands and knees, kotowing to Ki Lee, begging in high-pitched Mongolian that his life be spared.

Ki Lee stood erect, like a giant, looked down, pointed the gun down.

"Wait a minute," said Arnold White, still seated, still smiling. "First let him tell us for whom he works; although it seems certain that it was Brennan who employed him. Tell him we'll save his life if he reveals the orders his boss gave him."

"He would not talk," Ki Lee answered. "It is against our race. He can but beg for his life and ask me in the name of Mohammed to save him. By doing this, he places me in a bad position with Mohammed, who said a man must spare the life of him who sincerely pleads. What he does not know is that I no longer believe in Mohammed and that I have no qualms about killing."

Big Red, kotowing, was moving closer to Ki Lee. And now, suddenly, hearing these words, he catapulted his body across the room, tackled Ki Lee's legs. The impact of his hurtling body sent the real Mongolian down on his face.

ALMOST at once, Big Red was up, the automatic out of his holster now, in his hand. Arnold White was out of his chair, gun in hand, firing. Ki Lee was getting up. The Spaniard, at the door, was jerking out his weapon.

Big Red fired at Arnold White, but he was moving toward the door. He missed. The Spaniard blocked him, his gun lashing out wildly.

Wham! Wham!

Red's own crash of bullets caught the Spaniard in the stomach, doubled him, sent him down bleeding, his arms flopping out.

Red yanked open the door; but Ki Lee, up now, hurled himself on Brennan. Doing this, Ki Lee inadvertently blocked Arnold White's firing. Ki Lee's gun slipped into Red's stomach. Brennan jerked it away, bashed his own gun butt into Ki Lee's face. The Mongolian's forehead split. Blood spurted from it. But he kept fighting.

Brennan saw the girl, Dee, rush out through the open door. Ki Lee was bringing up his gun again. Red saw this, saw more of Arnold White's men rushing in from one of the other rooms. He pointed his own weapon straight into Ki Lee's sweating saffron face and pulled the trigger.

Ki Lee went down like a sack of cement, lay inert.

Red Brennan rushed into the hall. The pack of men from inside were on his heels, and he knew that one lingering moment longer and he would be shot full of holes.

He dashed down the hall. A hand suddenly thrust something out at him.

In that flashing instant Brennan saw the girl, saw her terrified face. He paused.

"Go on! Go on!" she implored. "You'll be killed. *I'm* all right."

HE took the paper she offered, then rushed on. A volly of shots burst behind him. He hit the stairs, slid, stumbled down them. He rushed out into the safety of the street, where a bombing was going on. He held himself against the building to read what the girl had given him, and as he stood like this he heard the drone of planes flying eastward in Shanghai's sky. He did not even look upward.

Scrawled on the paper he held in his hand, were the words:

> They suspected you from the first, but I had to contact you. I prepared this note to give you in case things turned out as they have, and you escaped alive. Tell the man who employs you that the real headquarters of the spy ring, where all the plans and documents—including a list of each and every member's name—are hidden, is an apartment at 50 W. Bund Road. Go there at once. I obtained this information at great risk, as the address of headquarters is the spy ring's greatest secret.

Big Red Brennan smiled in spite of himself, at the words "tell the man who employs you." She, too, thought he was a Mongolian. If nothing else, the rôle had been convincing.

But he wondered now who she was? He alone had been assigned to this case by the Intelligence, and she somehow didn't fit into the picture. He remembered her large brown eyes; the narrow, sweet softness of her face; the hat dipped over one eye. Emotion touched him. He was concerned, suddenly, about her safety.

He moved through the streets now, thinking of her, saying over and over: "Dee—— Dee gave me the lead I sought. Dee——"

CHAPTER V.

THE STREETS OF HELL.

THE little apartment house in the shady quiet of West Bund Road was like something in the Latin quarter of Paris: sloping roofs, thatched; skylight windows; the outside trimmed with patchworks of adobe. Only the ravage of war a few blocks off reminded Brennan that he was in Shanghai.

He was Brennan again, too. The grease paint had been taken off, though faint traces of it remained, for he had done the job quickly. He was garbed in his white uniform, the big automatic strapped about his waist, his officer's cap cocked on the side of his head, showing just a little of his red hair, and quite a little of his hard, rugged cheek-boned face.

There were Chinese on the streets, some of them slumped against the buildings, snatching hours of sleep; others sitting, staring vacantly, knowing not where they would go next. But there was less noise here than in any other part of town. The fact was of no significance; it was neither proof nor assurance that this would not be the next section to be shattered with Japanese bombs.

Big Red moved in through the door of the apartment house on the street. It was No. 50, and because it was a flat, two-story place, he saw at once that the spy ring had either rented or purchased the entire premises. The hallway was empty. The floors were bare of rugs, but scrubbed and shining clean. There was a narrow stairway, and this Brennan took.

This was the last lap, he told himself. It didn't matter much how he conducted the rest of his investigation. The important thing was to get the evidence he needed.

On the second floor, he saw a heavy oak door with a knocker, and this he knew was the door to the studio apartment, with the skylight. He paused, and then he heard movement and flattened against the wall, waiting.

The door opened and a man came out. Brennan quickly stepped up, threw his arm about the man's neck, applied an instant, quick jujutsu hold, so that the man's breath was taken away.

Brennan held this for a moment; then, he released his helpless victim and eased him to the floor.

Unholstering his .45, he stepped in through the open door of the apartment.

THE place was filled with sunlight, but it was empty. A huge easel stood on one side of the room; American antique furniture decorated the remainder. He stood there for a moment looking around, and then he saw that this room was a blind; that there must be one beyond. He moved quickly to the opposite wall, ran his hand along the panels.

A door slid back suddenly.

He stared into the interior of a room that was like the inside of a giant vault. There was a radio sending set, a safe, two tables, several chairs. Then he saw the figure strapped in a chair deep in one corner. He crossed the room. It was Dee. There was a gag over her mouth; the ropes that held her in the chair were heavy.

Her brown eyes were wide, terrified. He went to her quickly, undid the ropes.

"I'm the Mongolian," he said. "I am——"

"What?"

He laughed softly. "It was make-up. I'm a United States Naval Intelligence agent."

She got out of the chair. "You've just come in time." She was breathless. "All along they had trusted me. I went to get you because that was one of their assignments, and I didn't know whether you were a real Mongolian killer—or what. That was why I didn't dare say anything to you. But I had that note ready. One of them saw me give it to you. At least, he saw me talking to you there in the hall. So they were going to torture me to make me talk."

"But this—this is their headquarters?"

"Yes," she said. "This is the most secret of all their rooms. It is the first time I have been here, too. I learned of it from papers I found, but—— Come, we must hasten. Can you get that safe open?"

Big Red turned, saw the safe. He dropped to his knees, whispering: "Now when I was a safe-cracker——" But his fingers were working on the dials; his ears were tuned to hear the tumblers click.

Dee stood watch by the door. The minutes were agony—eternity. Big Red was sweating, his fingers tingling with an aching numbness. Dee kept saying: "Hurry—hurry——"

"Why?" Brennan asked.

"They're all coming here," she said. "Ten of the most important of the gang. They think they can get information from me."

He wanted to ask her what information she had, but he did not; he worked feverishly at the safe.

THEY both heard the sound of men outside; they heard the heavy footfalls on the stairs. The safe door was still closed. Brennan pushed his gun across the floor. "Try and hold them a moment——"

He worked with painstaking care. He must not try to rush. Haste makes waste when you are trying to do a delicate job. Beads of sweat rolled down his cheeks.

He heard the men coming in. Dee fired her first shot—and a volley of thunder roared in answer. She dropped back behind the door, holding the gun.

At that moment, the safe opened.

Big Red Brennan reached in and scooped out a fistful of documents. He stuffed these into his tunic; reached in for more. Then he rose, still stuffing papers into his uniform. He grabbed the gun away from Dee, brushed her back and took her place by the door.

"Find some matches," he whispered. "Get the place burning. Lieutenant White knows me and I'm going to try and bluff it out with him for a minute, to give us time."

He waited, in the safety of the door, until the firing had died down.

"Hi—Arnold White," he said.

"Who is it?"

"It's me—Brennan. I got a lead on this place and came up. Did you come to help me?"

"Why, I——" White had to gain entrance to the door. "Why—ah—yes," he went on.

"Then for God's sake tell your men to stop shooting. What is this, anyway?"

"We—ah—we thought you were a spy," Arnold White said. He strode into the room. His gun was still in his hand.

To affect the friendship, Brennan had to let his gun barrel droop a little. Several other men came in after White.

Arnold White stood there in his baggy clothes, his faded-varnish skin looking almost yellow now.

"Hey—that girl!" said one of the men. "She's setting fire to——"

Arnold White looked at Brennan, said: *"The game's up, you dirty rat!"*

BIG RED had been waiting for that. White opened fire, but Brennan wasn't there, he was moving across the room, out of the line of fire. As he moved he leveled his own automatic, pressed the trigger. White went down in the first blast of shots, and Big Red was behind a chair, popping bullets at the other men.

Two more went down, almost together, as though it had been an act.

Big Red rose, lifting the chair. He hurled it at a third man, whirled even as the chair left his hand, popped one more shot, killed a man with it. Still another spy was rushing toward him. Big Red threw his gun—threw it squarely into the man's face.

Dee had lighted a fire and it was licking up around the walls.

Big Red slammed the door on the approaching men from the other room, scooped Dee up in his arm, and reached, with one hand, for a beam along the low ceiling.

"Catch on to it," he whispered.

Dee held, and Big Red climbed up, broke the glass of the skylight window. In a moment he was crawling out on the roof, lifting her now. Together, they scrambled for the edge. Big Red jumped, turned, held out his arms.

She leaped and he caught her, one short story, no more than a six-foot jump. He eased her to the street, and they rushed away.

The flame had followed them out the skylight, for it had needed only a draft. There was the roaring sound of gunfire behind them. Men were hanging out the windows. The studio apartment was raging in blaze. Big Red and Dee hurried through the streets of Shanghai.

"That washes up my assignment," he said. "The papers and documents I got from the safe will convict any members of the ring that weren't killed back there. I had some good ideas all throughout—but it's to you that I owe my final success. I don't know how to thank you, Dee. You don't know what it means to finish an assignment like that, to crack a ring of international spies that are in——"

"Don't I?" she said.

He stopped. "What do you mean?"

She said: "I mean we'll have to share the honors in this case, or I might lose my job. I'm a member of the British secret service. My assignment was the same as yours. But without you I—— Well, I wouldn't have come out of it alive. I——"

Big Red Brennan was grinning. "We'll share the honors, honey," he said. "And maybe a cocktail or two after a while in the International Settlement. I've been a long time looking for a girl like you, and—— Well, what I mean is, you're okay for my dough any day in the week!"

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CHIEF BENNETT OF FAIRFIELD

Five Years On a Case That Others Gave Up—And He Turned in the Criminal!

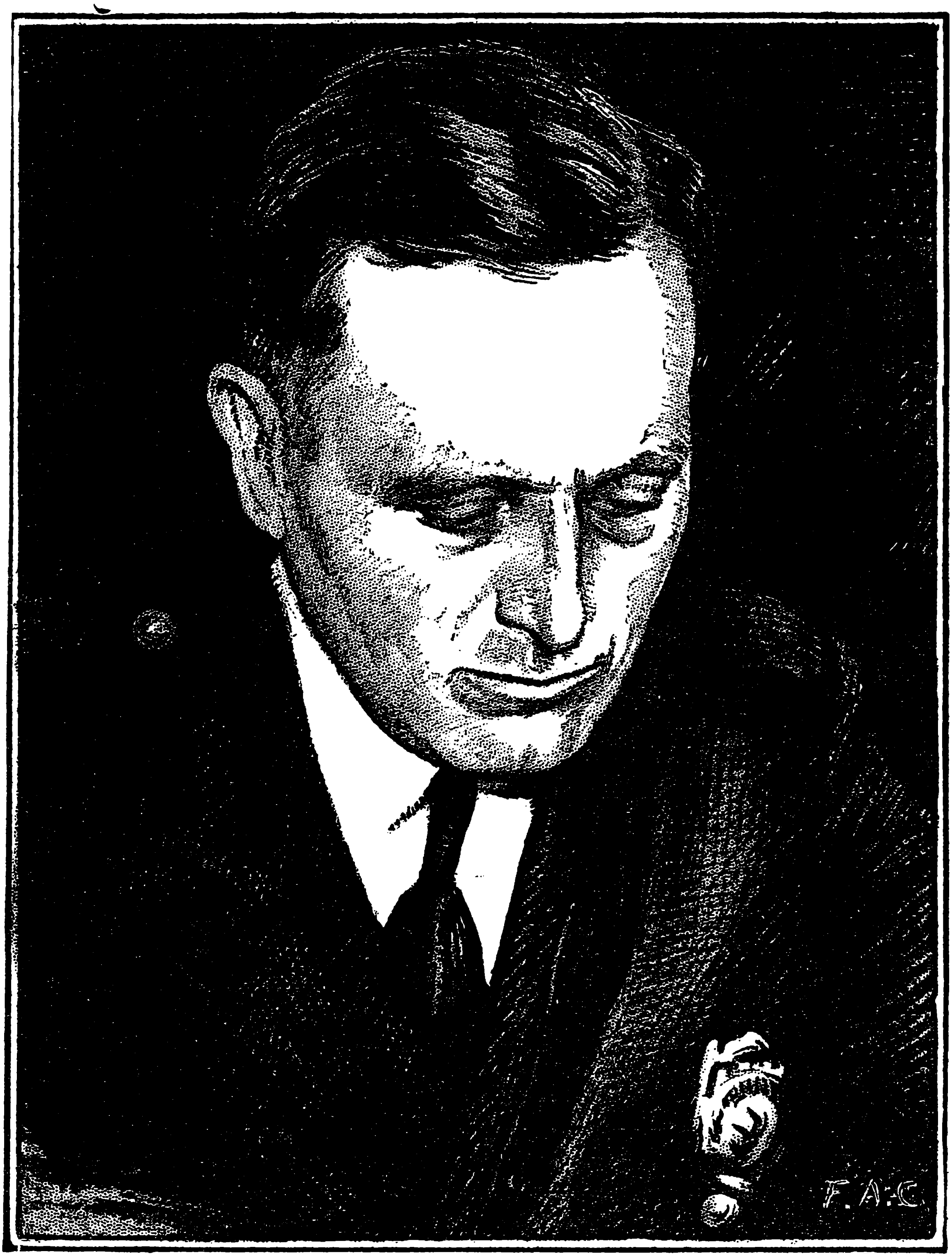
AMERICA is the land of success stories. They pop out at us from everywhere. Every trade, every business, every profession—every line of endeavor—has a dozen or more men whose careers are held out as the lure for young, ambitious men who want to get to the top. There is always the story of the long, hard struggle—which is sometimes not so long nor so hard—and then the "break" which puts them on top. The "break" in so many cases, is a matter of luck, and thus it loses much of its force as an appealing factor.

Especially true is this in the case of police work, where promotion, reputation, et cetera depends, so many times, upon work in some big case. Because you are fortunate enough to be around when something big breaks, you have the ground floor in getting somewhere on it. Or, perhaps, it just so happens that you get some much-wanted criminal when he crosses your path, and your reputation in the department is made.

Well, here is a different kind of success story. In fact, it's exactly the opposite of these spectacular cases. Understand, of course, that this is meant to be no disparagement of those who have found occasion to be spectacular in their work. As opportunity came, they seized it, and they deserve all the credit that can be had for doing so. But here is a case where opportunity didn't come; in fact, where opportunity seemed so far away that it took years to catch up to it, and all these years were done on William Bennett's own time, at that!

It was in the summer of 1932 that this story begins. Its start is the strange murder of a taxicab driver on Snake Hill, a mile or so out of Fairfield, Connecticut, which itself is not far from Bridgeport. A man driving over this lonely road in the early hours of the morning saw a form on the road, reported it to the police, and the mystery began.

No one had the slightest idea as to the cause of the taxi driver's murder. The first suggestion was, of course, that a fare had taken him out on this lonely road, then held him up and robbed him. The fact that no known enemies of the cab driver could be found strengthened this opinion, until further discoveries proved that the cab driver had been making a midnight trip to this section several times a week—or at least, that a cab had been seen there fairly often. Also, the further evidence that the cab driver had,



CRIME BUSTERS

OF AMERICA

CHIEF WILLIAM BENNETT

Fairfield, Conn.

on several occasions, had a strange woman caller who, apparently, was his fare on this unusual trip.

All of these bits of evidence were dug up while the case was being worked, and William Bennett, a sergeant and one of the younger members of the force, was on the job. However, he had to do what his superiors told him—and at first he himself did not see anything in the case that might lead to a solution.

Finally, mention of a soldier in the case brought more investigators. State police were called in; experts from other sections of the country came. And then the facts were gathered together and it was decided to go through the brush on Snake Hill to see if they would not find the midnight prowler who, by this time, was considered to be the murderer.

A great man-hunt was staged. Hundreds of men covered every bit of the ground; airplanes were overhead to direct the hunt, and Sergeant Bennett was among those beating their way through the woods, along with fellow officers. It was one of these officers and Bennett who saw the killer and spread the alarm. The planes overhead concentrated the forces, but somehow or other, the killer escaped. He slipped through the huge chain of searchers, and that means of securing his apprehension was gone forever.

But the hunt did lead the men to a cave in the hills; a cave in which was found a woman's handkerchief, and several buttons that came from an Army uniform!

For about a month more the search went on, with no results. Finally the case was put down as an unsolved murder, and although active work on it was stopped, it would still be something to worry about.

By this time, Sergeant Bennett had made up his mind as to a few of the things in the case. After a talk with a relative of the murdered man, Bennett decided to work on the theory that the murder was the result of a holdup. With the woman's handkerchief and the Army buttons found in the cave to work on, he took a chance that the murderer was an Army man, and a deserter, for Army deserters were known to use Snake Hill as a hideout.

He went to his Chief and asked for permission to work on the case. He was hoping against hope that he would be able to do what he wanted to. And, luckily, the Chief was willing to give him a break, provided Bennett carried on his regular duties at the same time. It would have been too much to assign a man to a case that seemed as hopeless as the Snake Hill murder, when there were other more pressing duties to take up the time of the Chief's force.

So Bennett went it alone. He started out by fraternizing with soldiers in nearby mill towns; getting acquainted with as many of them as possible.

Next, he secured a list of all deserters in the vicinity. This gave him a roll of several hundred names.

Then started the dull, routine work.

He wrote one letter after another, checking the actions of each of these men. He had to do it tactfully, indirectly, never allowing any one to realize just what he was driving after. But the letters did give him some results. After checking over all the answers, and ascertaining that the facts he received were correct, he cut his list down to several dozen names on which he could concentrate.

He did. He wrote more letters; he checked further with Army records, other police departments, and

Continued on page 107

FUR COAT MURDER

3 for 25¢
ALBERT MICALE

*A story of Jim Strong,
One-man Racket Squad*

By Frank Gruber

Jim Strong, the Racket Man, gives some fur coat peddlers a warm chase!

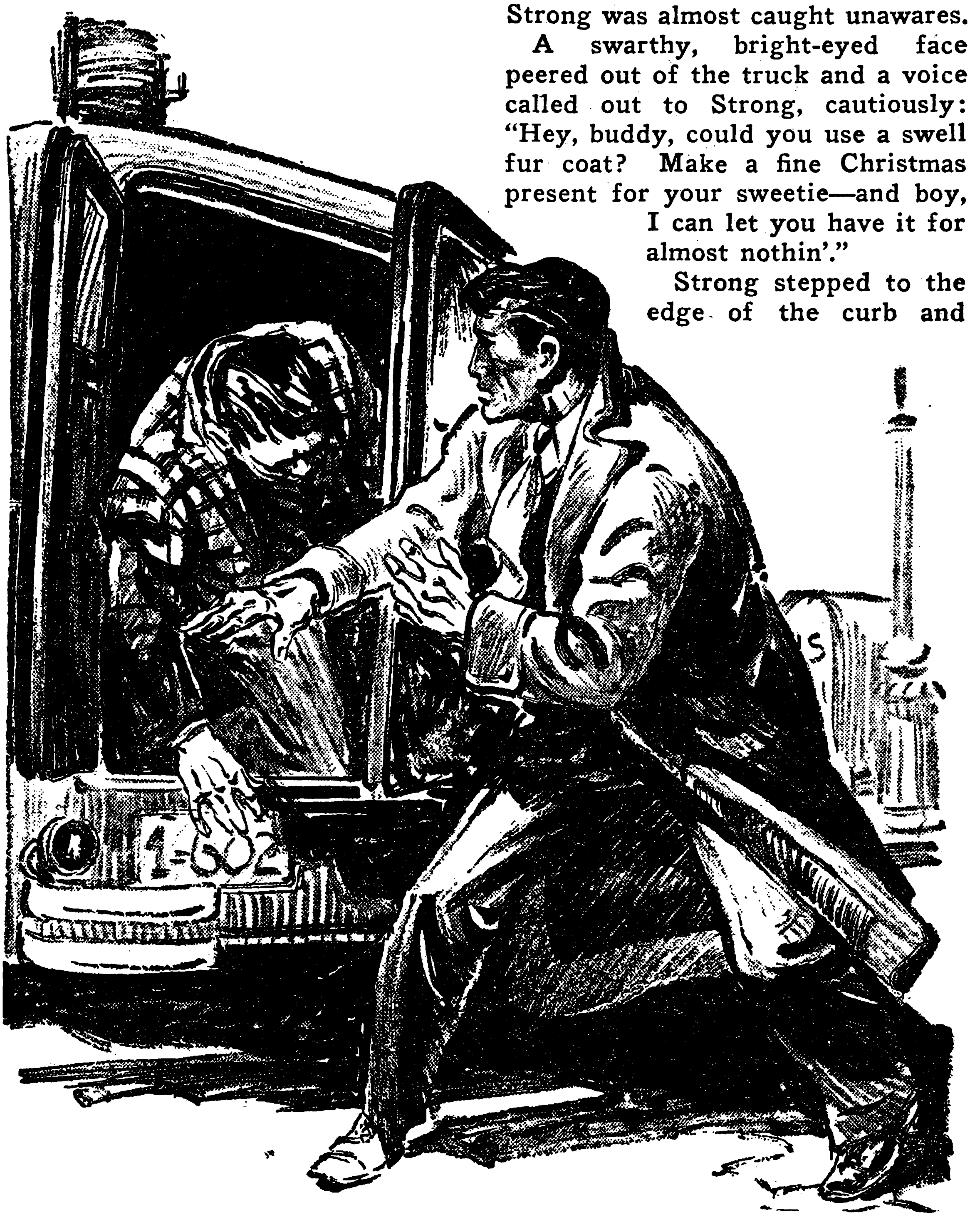
CHAPTER I.

COATS FOR SALE.

FOR three days Jim Strong, the Racket Man, had paced up and down Crosby Street, hoping a light delivery truck, minus identifying advertising, would pull up alongside of him. And now, when it did, Strong was almost caught unawares.

A swarthy, bright-eyed face peered out of the truck and a voice called out to Strong, cautiously: "Hey, buddy, could you use a swell fur coat? Make a fine Christmas present for your sweetie—and boy, I can let you have it for almost nothin'."

Strong stepped to the edge of the curb and



tried to look past the swarthy driver into the body of the truck. He asked: "What kind of fur is it?"

That was enough for the truck driver. He reached behind him and pulled out a shimmering white fur coat. "See, buddy," he croaked, his voice eager with greed, "ain't it a beaut? Genuine white fox. It's wort' t'ree hun'nerd smackers—but to you, buddy, I'll sell it for only forty—no, thirty bucks."

Strong pretended to draw back. "What's wrong with it?" he asked.

The man in the truck winked hugely. "Nothin', buddy. Only you see, a pal o' mine works for a big fur company. This coat—well, it got lost. Catch on? Anyway, thirty bucks and there ain't no labels in it an' a fur coat's a fur coat."

The Racket Man frowned. "Well ——" he began and reached for his hip pocket.

The swarthy man licked his lips greedily. Then his face broke into an expression of utmost consternation. For, instead of a wallet, Jim Strong had brought out a Police Positive.

"All right, *buddy!*" Strong said grimly. "Climb out of that truck. You're under arrest!"

The fur salesman bleated. Then, with a swift movement, he slid back behind the wheel and grabbed the gear-shift lever. His foot stamped down on the accelerator as Strong plunged forward. The car leaped ahead, but Strong was already half in it. He was torn from his feet and the gun knocked from his hand, but he lashed out with both hands and caught hold of the truck driver's heavy denim jacket.

The man yelled hoarsely and beat at Strong with his right fist, while his left hand clung to the wheel. Strong gritted his teeth and hung on. The driver, seeing he could not rid himself of Strong, suddenly jammed on the brakes. The car slewed to the curb, bumped and bounced up on the sidewalk. There it came to a stop.

The violent action of the truck almost dislodged Strong. But with the fear of being beaten from a moving automobile removed, he let go his grip on the truck driver's jacket and braced himself, on his knees, to make a fight of it. So did the truck driver. He reached for a wrench that lay on the seat beside him.

STRONG saw the wrench even as he was driving his fist into the man's face. He felt the cartilage of the man's nose give way under his knuckles; blood spurted out over his fist.

Then the fur coat salesman hit up at Strong with the wrench. Strong tried to roll with the blow, but the tool struck his chest and racked him clear across his shoulder. It was a shocking, numbing blow. Strong winced from the pain of it. He knew then that this would be no ordinary pinch. He had to make a fight of it, a real one.

Again he lashed out with both hands and caught hold of his opponent. He braced his feet on the running board of the truck and with one savage, terrific jerk, pulled the man clear out of the car.

The driver squealed and lashed again at Strong. The detective, still holding on, leaped down to the sidewalk and with a powerful sidewise shove, threw the man to the sidewalk, away from him.

Before the truck driver could recover, Strong kicked at the man's right wrist with his toe and sent the wrench flying. Strong's right hand whipped to his hip pocket and came out with a pair of handcuffs. The man on the sidewalk was half dazed, and before he quite realized it, Strong had snapped one of the links around a wrist. Holding the other link in his fist, Strong jerked the fur coat salesman to his feet.

"That'll be all of that, now!" he growled.

His captive, conceding defeat in the physical combat, tried new tactics. "What's the idea of the strong-arm stuff?" he complained. "So I ain't got a license to sell furs on the street? All right, gimme a ticket and I'll go down and pay my fine."

"No fine this time, pal," Strong said sarcastically. "The D. A.'s going to stop you crooks from rooking suckers with your cheap furs, passing them off as 'stolen' stuff. You're due to spend a few months in the cooler. But first—let's just take a look in the back of your bus. Maybe you *have* got some stolen furs there, after all. In which case——"

Strong's prisoner seemed to tremble. "Now look, copper, let's talk this over. I hooked a couple of guys to-day. I got a little roll. How about fifty bucks an'——"

"That's one more charge," said Strong. "Attempted bribery. You'll get another six months for that. Now, come on, open that door——"

The man snarled and pulled back on his imprisoned wrist. Strong jerked savagely and pulled the man around to the rear of the truck. He reached up, unfastened the doors and pressure from inside shoved them open against his face. Strong stepped back——

And a man fell into his arms!

A DEAD man. Strong knew that even before the body touched him. He knew it from the infinitesimal glance he got of the pasty face and staring eyes.

He recoiled, horrified, and threw up both hands instinctively. The dead man fell against him, and it was a moment before Strong could place the body down on the pavement. Not until then did he realize, in consternation, that he had let go of his prisoner's handcuffs and the man had seized the opportunity to make his get-away.

He was already fifty feet away, tearing around a building corner. Strong poised on his toes, half decided to pursue the fleeing man. He realized then that he had lost his gun during the beginning of his attack on the fur coat salesman; that he couldn't just let this truck, with the dead man beside it, remain here. It might be a long pursuit, considering the start the driver had.

And while he hesitated, trying to make up his mind, it became too late. The man was gone for good, and Strong was left in possession of a corpse and a truck loaded with sleazy fur coats.

Several pedestrians had gathered a short distance off. Strong yelled to them, "One of you get to a phone and call the police department. Have them send a corpse wagon."

It was five minutes before the first of the police, in a squad car, appeared. Strong identified himself to them and gave orders regarding the disposal of the corpse and the truck. Then he walked abruptly away. In the next block he hailed a cruising taxi and ten minutes later paid the driver off in front of the district attorney's office.

Strong's face was bitter-looking when he entered his own private office a few moments later. The clerk in the anteroom spoke to him, but Strong did not even hear him. Inside his private office Strong slumped down into his swivel chair, his hat still on his head.

He stared glumly at the bare wall ahead of him. Five minutes later, he roused himself and pressed a button on his desk. The clerk from the other room stuck his head into Strong's office.

"Run out and get me a copy of *The Callboard,*" Strong said.

Then he got up from his chair and crossed the room to a locked door. He fished a key out of his pocket and unlocked the door. He threw it open, looked into a small room and his face lost its bitter look. Strong was almost smiling.

THIS was Strong's "gadget room." In it was the result of his twelve years' work in the district attorney's office. During those years, Strong, a sergeant in the department, had earned the nickname, the "Racket Man." That was because he specialized in rackets. He knew more about them than any policeman in the city. District attorneys came and went, yet Strong remained in the office, despite elections and periodical shake-ups.

That was because retiring D. A.s usually spoke to their successors about Jim Strong. And in a little while Strong always demonstrated his peculiar prowess to the new D. A.s.

In this gadget room were hundreds of mechanical contrivances, perpetual-motion machines, patented can openers, labor-saving devices, "homework" gadgets, contraptions, devices and just plain junk. There was more, too: an entire shelf heaped high with beautiful bonds, stocks, shares, advertising literature, prospectuses.

Everything in the room had at one time or another figured in a racket or swindle. And so they had found their way to Detective Sergeant Jim Strong's gadget room.

He rummaged about the room for several minutes, found a couple of pieces of paper and carried them out into his office. The clerk came back about that time with a copy of *The Callboard.*

Strong began thumbing through the magazine. It was a weekly, catering to actors, circus and carnival people and affiliated vocations.

He had just found something that interested him when there was a brisk step in the doorway and Murdock, the district attorney, entered the room.

CHAPTER II.

SALESMEN OF TROUBLE.

"AH, Strong," the D. A. said. "I see you're back. I just got a report on a murder on Crosby Street. Is it true?"

Strong nodded. "Yes. I intended giving you my own report when I had something figured out."

The D. A. scowled. "When you got around to it, huh? Well, look, Strong, you get a lot of privileges around this office. But not so many that you don't have to report *murders* in which one of my policemen is personally involved."

Strong stiffened. "I didn't kill the man," he stated. "He'd been dead at least twenty-four hours. I left orders to make a thorough examination of the dead man and the truck, and I know the laboratory will give me a complete report when they finish. In the meantime, there were certain aspects about the thing I wanted to look into here. You know, of course, that I've been out the last three days on that fur coat racket."

"Yes," said the D. A. "We'd had more than the usual number of complaints and I knew that a strong gang was making a determined effort to mop up the city with those cheap furs."

"Right," said Strong. "McCartney, Swanson and Fogarty spent ten days trying to get a line on them, without success. I called them off and went out myself three days ago. I worked Crosby Street because it's in the heart of the factory district, and we hadn't had any complaints from anyone around there. I knew the crooks would hit the street sooner or later. One of them did, today. I arrested him after a bit of a fight. I had one cuff on him and thought I'd take a look inside the truck. I opened the door and —well, what would you do if a dead man fell out of a door you were opening?"

The D. A. shook his head. "I'd probably pass out cold."

Strong grinned. "Well, I didn't quite do that. But I came damn close. Anyway, I let go of this crook—and he ran off. But I had the truck. Even if the license plates are stolen or phony, I'll still have plenty of leads to the man. I'll get him."

"How?"

STRONG tapped the copy of *The Callboard* before him. "Here. There are two ads in this. One of the companies is in New York, the other's here in Chicago. Chances are this man got them here in town."

Murdock leaned over Strong's shoulder. "Fur coats—$8.50!" he exclaimed. "How can they do it?"

"Sweatshop labor and cheap raw materials. This place buys the scraps and remnants from the reliable furriers. They get them for practically nothing. So they get some foreigner who's only been over in this country a few years and not eligible for relief. The sweatshop gives him a bunch of scraps and pays him a flat price per coat. Perhaps a dollar and a half. The poor foreigner knows a bit about the business and teaches his entire family. The whole bunch of them, mother, father and probably four or five children get busy and sew up all these scraps. Perhaps the family makes only one coat in a day. I investigated a bit several years ago and found that a combined family of six people, working twelve hours a day on these cheap coats, often earned only eight or ten dollars a week."

"I was under the impression that most of these cheap coats were made of inferior furs, dyed rabbit for example," said the D. A.

"Sometimes they are," replied Strong. "Dyed rabbit—and dog—come up at times under some amazing names—Minkol, Siberian Seal, Bulgarian Beaver and phonies like those. But rabbit fur is comparatively expensive compared to this scrap stuff. So you see, the manufacturer can sell these coats at $8.50 to the retailer, and still make a profit The retailer, of course, makes a much greater profit. In many cases, he sells a coat for as high as $50.00. Of course, you understand, the retailer takes a risk.

"But not as much as you'd think. He knows there's a bit of larceny in the hearts of most people. By his hint that this is an expensive coat, but stolen, he makes of the buyer a lawbreaker. The buyer finds out later the coat isn't any good. But still, he isn't sure it wasn't stolen to begin with, and is therefore afraid to report the matter to the police. Of course, we've had a dozen complaints lately, more than usual, but that isn't one-tenth the number of coats that have been sold around this city."

"Probably not," admitted Murdock. "But where do you figure this murder comes in? Someone wanted to report the crook to the police?"

"Probably. At least I'm working on that angle. As soon as I get a report from the lab, I'll be on the trail."

"I hope so," said the D. A. "The papers got the story and inasmuch as this office was mentioned in connection with it, I want an arrest as soon as possible. I've got to leave now, but if you get anything, let me know. I'll be at the Sheridan Beach Hotel all evening."

SCARCELY had the D. A. left the office, than a man came over from the police laboratory. His report was not a cheering one, to Strong.

"It looks tough," he said. "Fingerprints all over the car, but no record of them. Which means the man's never been convicted of a crime before. The license plates—doctored. The truck—built from the junk heap. No two pieces came from the same original machine."

"Damn!" said Strong. "And what about the dead man?"

The lab man shrugged. "Nothing. All identifying marks had been removed from his clothing. He was apparently killed sometime yesterday. Strangled with a thin, strong cord, but the cord wasn't around. There was a heavy sack in the truck and a pile of bricks, and it's my guess they were intended to sink the body in the river somewhere."

"Probably," conceded Strong. "And now—for the last chance. The fur coats, did they reveal anything?"

"Only that they'd apparently been made by the same workers; the stitching and method of cutting the pieces showed that. They were all white scraps."

Strong's forehead wrinkled. Then he reached out and tapped the magazine containing the fur coat ad. "Which leaves me this," he said. "All right, thanks. It's not your fault there isn't more."

It was already four-thirty in the afternoon but Strong left his office and took a taxi to an address on South Franklin Street. The Tabor Fur Co., he discovered, was located in the first-floor store front of an old building.

THE premises consisted of one long room, around which hung beautiful furs and a number of made-up fur coats. There were three persons in the place, two men and a woman. A paunchy, middle-aged man with a bullet-shaped head walked up when Strong entered. He rubbed his hands together, pleasantly.

"Something in furs, mister? A nice white fox coat?"

"Maybe," said Strong. "Around $8.50."

"Ah," said the paunchy man. "One of our specials. You're a carnival man, huh?"

"No, I'm a policeman."

The fat man's eyes almost popped out of their sockets. Strong saw the other man and woman stop their work and look in his direction.

"A policeman!" exclaimed the fur man. "What—what you want with me?"

"That remains to be seen. You're Tabor?"

The man bobbed his head up and down. "Yes. Sam Tabor. And that's my brother, Leo—and our sister."

"Is that so? And now tell me something about your business. These phony coats you sell——"

"Phony?" cut in Sam Tabor. "Do our ads say they're A-1 coats? Read them, policeman. I wrote them myself. They say: 'Pieced Fox. Semi-fitted.' My lawyer even said it was okay. After all, what kind of fur coat can you expect for $8.50—even wholesale?"

Strong waved a hand. "I'm not questioning your ad. The Federal

Trade Commission would have got after you if it wasn't up to snuff. Let's say your coats *are* worth $8.50. To whom do you sell them?"

Sam Tabor's face showed relief. "Oh, lots of people. Carnival people. They use them in bingo games, sometimes. Show folks who like to make a flash and ain't got much money."

"You sell retail, too?"

"Some, but mostly wholesale. A half-dozen coats, maybe a dozen."

Strong looked toward a desk littered with papers in one corner. "Now, you're getting close. I want a list of every customer you've had during the past six months who bought *more* than a dozen coats."

SAM TABOR'S eyes were big again. "Why——" he floundered. "I—I don't keep records of all the sales. Some of them are cash, you know——"

"They probably are," interrupted Strong. "I can't see you selling on credit to your type of buyer. But—I know damn well you know personally every big buyer. And just so we get things straight, Sam Tabor, let me say that I remember you very well. Eleven years ago I had you sent up for two years for a little 'home-work' racket. Remember?"

Watching Tabor, he continued: "Yes, you do. You probably got smart and you're operating within the law now. But your customers aren't. We found over twenty coats today in one lot. And one gang has unloaded more than a hundred during the past month. I want the names of your big buyers."

Sam Tabor looked over at his brother, Leo. The latter shrugged. Sam nodded briskly. "All right, Sergeant Strong. *Heh-heh,* you see, I remember, too. And because I do, I'm playing ball with you. Well, then——"

From his desk, Tabor fished out a small loose-leaf book. "I don't have to look far for the folks who made purchases like that from me. There're only two—Pedro Matchez, of Los Angeles——"

"He's out," cut in Strong. "Come closer."

"And Pete Nichols, of Detroit. Nichols is my biggest customer. He's good for a hundred coats a month."

Strong scowled. "Detroit is three hundred miles away. I want your big Chicago buyers."

Sam Tabor wagged his head. "Sorry, copper, I ain't got a Chi customer who's bought more'n six coats from me in a year. Maybe—maybe the party you're lookin' for got his coats from some other manufacturer."

"No, you're the only one in Chicago. Let me see that book."

Strong took it from the fur man and thumbed through the scrawled pages. Sam Tabor had told the truth.

Strong frowned. "I'll take the book with me, Tabor," he said, after a moment. "And at the same time, I'm giving you a warning. If you're holding out a customers' list on me, I'll know it by tomorrow morning sure——"

"I ain't afraid," said Tabor. "You can even plant a cop outside to watch I don't move out my stock during the night."

"It wouldn't be worth hauling away," snapped Strong as he went outside.

AT Wells and Adams, he went into a cigar store and made a phone call to the D. A.'s office. "Send a wire to Detroit," Strong told the sergeant on the desk. "Find out about a Pete Nichols, who's in the fur coat business. How he sells them and where he operates, or if he's been away from Detroit lately. I'll be at the Sheridan Beach Hotel with the boss."

Leaving the cigar store, Strong walked east to Michigan Avenue and there mounted a north-bound bus. He rode in it for a half hour, then got out and walked two blocks east to the huge Sheridan Beach Hotel, on the lake front.

Murdock was not in his room. Strong had him paged and a bellboy came back with the message: "He's in the barber shop, getting a haircut. He says for you to wait for him in the bar. Says to have a beer—or something!"

Strong went to the exquisitely furnished bar and cocktail lounge, that seemed to be a well patronized adjunct to the hotel. But he was not in the mood for a beer. He did, however, order a lemonade and sipped on it.

Five minutes passed and Murdock did not show up. Strong finished the lemonade and wondered if he should have another. While weighing the matter in his mind, he glanced around the lounge and became aware of a group gathered around a table in a corner. He had vaguely heard the chatter of this group's conversation before, but had paid no attention to it.

Now, though, something caught his interest. A gorgeously gowned woman had gotten up from the cushioned seat behind the table and had picked up an exquisite fur coat. It was white, and that color and the problem uppermost in Strong's mind registered on his brain. Anything pertaining to furs would have registered with him, at the moment.

Strong picked up his empty lemonade glass and said to the bartender, "Fix me up another of these and bring it to my table."

He had no table, but he found one—within six feet of the table in the corner. He sat down, half turned away from the group. He didn't have to see. He wanted only to hear.

CHAPTER III.

THE SWANNS.

THE woman in the group was showing off the beautiful white coat. "Isn't it precious?" she cooed to the group.

"Oh!" exclaimed another woman. "I'd give a year of my life to have a coat like that. But John says with the market the way it is, it'll be 1940 before I can have another coat."

"Oh, no, Stella!" exclaimed the woman with the fur coat. "You'd be surprised if you knew what this coat cost."

"Plenty, I'll bet," said the first woman. She leaned across the table to examine the furs. "Why, you never bought that coat for less than seven hundred dollars!"

Strong turned a bit closer toward the group at the other table. He saw a sleek-looking man frowning at the woman with the coat. "Now wait a minute, darling," the man said. "You promised you wouldn't get me into trouble again."

"Oh, don't be an old kill-joy, Nick," pouted the fur-coated woman. "They haven't complained *yet*, have they?"

"What in the world are you two talking about?" asked the woman called Stella.

"Why, Nick's business. He sells these coats wholesale to the exclusive shops. And Stella, darling, you've *no* idea of the difference in the wholesale and the retail prices."

"Yes," cut in Nick. "But, Lisa, you know I'm not allowed to sell my samples at wholesale prices. I told you that only last week when you forced —— Well, when you told me to give that beautiful coat to Nell Barkley."

Strong's nostrils were flaring by this time. Then Murdock came into the cocktail lounge. "Ah, Strong!" the D. A. exclaimed. "Here you are."

Strong, annoyed, rose swiftly from his table. He caught the D. A. by an elbow and propelled him out of the room. In the lobby, Murdock protested, "What's the idea?"

"Do you know any of those people that were next to my table in the bar?"

Murdock scowled. "Yes, I knew them all. A couple of them live here regularly, and the others are staying here at the hotel temporarily."

"The woman with the fur coat—Lisa, she was called; you know her?"

"Lisa Swann? Yes. Her husband, the big chap, introduced me last night. We had a sort of party down here."

Strong nodded grimly. "Well, Mr. Murdock, would you mind going up to your room and waiting for me for about an hour? I'll give you my report to date then. I—it's really important, Mr. Murdock."

The D. A. wasn't very well pleased, but he shrugged and headed for the elevators.

Strong dropped into a leather chair in the lobby. While he waited, he ran through the order book he had appropriated at the Tabor Fur Co. offices. There was no one by the name of Swann in it. He hadn't expected there would be.

IT was ten minutes before the Swanns and their friends came out of the cocktail lounge. Strong got casually to his feet and when he saw the group moving toward the elevators, he beat them to the waiting car and stepped far back inside.

They all got in and the car started up. It was a moment before someone in the crowd gave the direction, "Eight, please."

The car stopped at the eighth floor and everyone got out, Strong along with the rest. But while they headed off toward the right, the detective casually sauntered down the corridor to the left. He went only around a corner, however. There, he waited a moment; then he started back.

The Swanns had entered a suite by that time, but Strong had no difficulty in finding it. They were still chattering noisily. Strong nodded in satisfaction.

It was fifteen minutes before the door of the suite opened. Strong, by that time, was near the elevators. As he had expected, only Stella and her escort came out. The Swanns remained in their suite. But when Strong saw the white fur coat draped around the woman, Stella, he nodded and left the vicinity of the elevator banks.

He walked quietly back to the suite occupied by the Swanns. He put his hand carefully on the doorknob, then gave it a twist and a sudden shove. The door flew open and Strong stepped into the room.

Nick Swann was standing near the window by a wardrobe trunk that was stuffed with fur coats.

"Hello, folks!" Strong grinned.

"Who're you?" scowled Nick Swann. "And what's the idea busting in like this?"

"I'm interested in fur coats," said Strong. "I'd like to buy one." He saw Stella's eyes widen. Nick Swann's scowl left his face.

Strong continued: "Now, don't tell me you don't sell retail because I know you sold Stella a coat."

"Stella?" asked Nick Swann. "I don't know whom you mean."

"The woman who just left this room. She *forced* you to sell her one of those beautiful fur coats at a ridiculously low price, didn't she?"

NICK SWANN drew a deep breath. "All right, you been spying. I'm not supposed to sell a coat at a retail price. You're a cop. All right, so I sold a coat to a pal of my wife's. What's the harm in that?"

"The harm is that you and your wife stop at a ritzy hotel like this and put on a grand show. Your wife wears a thousand-dollar coat and builds up the envy of every woman in the hotel. You two put on an act and let yourself be *forced* to sell a coat or two for the ridiculously low wholesale price of maybe seventy-five or a hundred dollars—or whatever the traffic will bear. Only the buyers don't get a coat like Lisa's. What they get is a coat for which you pay $8.50!"

"Oh, come now!" protested Nick Swann. "Who ever heard of a coat selling for $8.50?"

"I have," replied Strong. "And to an inexperienced person, the coat, on casual examination, doesn't look a great deal different from the thousand-dollar one Lisa's wearing. Cut out the stalling, Nick. I want to know where you buy those cheap coats!"

He strode across the room and scooped up one of the cheap fur coats. A quick examination showed him that it was one of the tawdry coats.

Nick Swann was biting his fingernails. "I don't remember where I got the pelts, copper," he said. "I bought them at an auction in St. Louis."

"Come again, Swann," said Strong. "You've only got a half-dozen coats here. They won't last you through the week. You've got a source of supply."

"No, I haven't. Really," Swann said. "Here, I'll show you the label of the manufacturer."

He thrust both hands into the wardrobe trunk containing the coats. Strong, too late, reached forward to claw at Swann's hands. The sleek fur coat salesman side-stepped and his hands came out of the trunk with a blackjack.

Strong yelped and threw himself to one side. Swann, with a snarl, followed him. Strong threw up his left arm to shield himself and attempted to hit Swann with his other hand.

He landed a clumsy blow into Swann's face, but then the blackjack struck his upraised arm with numbing force. Strong's arm fell to his side.

Swann followed after Strong. Desperately, Strong reached for his hip pocket with his right hand. He got his hand on the butt of his Police Positive, started pulling it out. He didn't get a chance to use it, though. Not then. Swann, seeing him reach for his gun, made a desperate lunge toward Strong.

Strong tried to duck, but the blackjack exploded on his chin. Fire streaked down into his body, up into his brain. He fell to his knees and there, even as nausea gripped him, he made a desperate effort to bring up his gun. He would have made it, too, except that Lisa Swann suddenly screamed and flung her fur coat at Strong.

Strong saw the snowy blanket flying down upon him and whipped out to brush it aside. Instead, his gun barrel caught one edge of it and he pulled the coat down over his head. It enveloped his head completely. He fought to get it off him and knew even as he struggled, that he was licked—beaten by the fur coat.

The blackjack thudded down on him, smashing him squarely in the face. The thick fur was some protection to Strong, but Swann was swinging heavily and the Racket Man knew that blood was spurting from his nose, soiling the white fur. He threw himself backward, still fighting the fur.

And then the world seemed to fall down on Strong. A holocaust of fire enveloped him and he knew that he was falling—falling into a deep black hole. And that was all he knew for a while.

IN his semiconsciousness Jim Strong dreamed that the Mississippi River was flowing over him. He knew that he was strangling from water and fought against it. Then, suddenly, he was fully conscious and looking up into the face of John Murdock, the district attorney. Murdock held a glass pitcher in his hand. It was empty and Strong's head was soaked.

Strong sat up abruptly and pain shot through him.

"So you got conked again, Strong?" the D. A. said sarcastically.

Strong put a hand to his sensitive nose and brought it away, covered with blood. He looked around and saw the open wardrobe trunk. "They didn't take the coats?"

"No. Someone heard a shot and phoned for the house dick. He came up and the people in this room left by the fire escape. When he broke the door down, he found you on the floor, out cold. He phoned me—— Strong, how many times have I warned you about playing a lone hand?"

Strong climbed to his feet. "I've always gotten results, haven't I, Mr. Murdock?"

"Yes. But today, you've lost out twice. You knew downstairs that these people belonged to the fur coat gang. But would you tip me off, so I could call some cops? No, you told me nothing, insisted on playing a lone game. So they got away. And now, what——"

"Now, I think I'll go and gather them in," Strong announced grimly.

The D. A.'s sardonic look vanished. His face became eager. "You've a lead to them?"

Strong looked around the floor. "That book I had with me—they took that with them?"

"Evidently. It isn't around. Well—who are they and where'll you find them?"

"I don't know. They used the name of Swann here, but that probably isn't their real name. I don't know where they've gone."

"Oh——" the D. A. sighed.

"But I'm not so much interested in getting the Swanns," Strong went on. "I want the man behind the Swanns—and the other petty crooks who're selling the coats. I want the man who killed that man yesterday. And I *can* get him!"

"Then why didn't you say so." The D. A. stepped to the phone. "Where do you want the squad of police to meet you?"

"Nowhere," said Strong. "Play along with me a couple of hours longer. I don't want a raid. It may defeat my purpose. Two hours is all I want."

He thought for a moment that the D. A. would refuse, but then Murdock threw up his shoulders and let them fall in surrender. "All right, Strong, two hours. And if you muff—regardless of your past record—we're going to have words."

"Okay," grinned Strong. He knew Murdock's bark was worse than his bite. He got along better with him than he had with any previous district attorney.

CHAPTER IV.

ORDERS TO KILL.

STRONG left the hotel room and rode downstairs. Out in front of the hotel, he nodded to the doorman. "Taxi!" he ordered.

The uniformed man put a whistle to his mouth, but before he even blew it a yellow machine zoomed up and stopped before the curb. Strong opened the door, stepped in and collided with the muzzle of an automatic pistol.

"Sit down and shut your mouth," said a harsh voice.

Strong dropped to the leather cushion and the cab started off with a jerk. The man beside Strong jammed his gun into Strong's side. With his free hand, he whisked Strong's Police Positive—which the Racket Man had reclaimed up in the hotel room—from his hip pocket.

"I'll bet you t'ought I'd be in Kansas by this time," the man with the gun growled then.

He was the swarthy truck driver of the morning's adventure. His lip was split from Strong's fist and he didn't seem too happy about it.

"No," Strong said. "I didn't think you'd leave town. Without a boss to tell you what to do, you wouldn't be able to find your way home every evening."

"A wise guy, huh?" gritted the thug. "Well, me boy, where we're goin' you won't mebbe be so wise."

"Nick Swann got you here quick," Strong remarked.

"I don't know no one by that name," was the answer. "Me, I did this on me own hook."

"Yes? Well, let *me* give the driver of this cab directions—to go to South Franklin Street."

That scored. The swarthy man's eyes widened. "I was about to go there anyway," said Strong. "He didn't sell the coats in large quantities to any retailer in this city. But plenty of coats have been pushed around town, so it *has* to be Tabor who's bossing you and Swann and the others."

"Shut your trap!" snarled the man with the gun.

He did not give orders to the cab driver. The man seemed to know his business, though, which proved that he was in league with the swarthy man. He drove the cab south on Sheridan Road, through Lincoln Park and down Michigan Avenue. At Van Buren, he turned west and a few minutes later brought the machine to a stop before the building which housed the Tabor Fur Co.

IT was about nine in the evening, but no section of Chicago is so deserted after seven o'clock as the wholesale district. There wasn't a soul in sight on the street.

"All right, buddy," ordered the swarthy man. "Pile out. This is the end of the line."

Strong opened the door and stepped out to the sidewalk. The gunman followed, but the cab driver shifted into gear and drove off. He seemed in a hurry, too.

There was a light inside the store occupied by the Tabor Fur Co., but when he reached the door Strong saw only Leo Tabor, the "silent" of the two Tabor brothers. Leo opened the door hurriedly and Strong and his guard went inside.

"Sam's in back," croaked Leo Tabor.

Strong hadn't guessed that there was another room in the rear of the store. There was, and there Strong saw not only Sam Tabor but Lisa and Nick Swann.

"Ah, Sergeant Strong," Sam Tabor chuckled.

"Just a family party," Strong remarked.

"No," said Sam Tabor. "A wake. Yours! You got too nosey. And too smart. Me—I didn't like Joliet. Bad for my lungs. I don't figure on going back there."

"Well, you won't go back for long, Sam," said Strong, "This time it's murder. You'd have to stay in jail only a few months and then——"

"Stop it, Strong!" shivered Sam Tabor. "That shamus had it coming to him."

"Ah, he was a private detective."

"Yes. Nick clipped a rich dame and the damn fool insisted on revenge. Hell, Nick wanted to give the dame her money back, but she wouldn't listen. She got that nosey shamus after him——"

"Us, Sam," corrected Nick Swann. "And just for the record, it wasn't *my* idea to knock off that detective."

"I see," said Sam Tabor. "You're in for the profits—but not for the risk. All right, me and Smoky knocked off the shamus. We'll let *you* knock off this one. That'll make us all equal."

Strong saw Nick Swann recoil. The sleek, phony fur salesman didn't mind rooking suckers—but murder was too strong for him. His partner, Lisa, let out a squeak. "No, Nick!" she cried. "Let's get out of here!"

"Smoky," the swarthy gunman, grinned wickedly. He swung his automatic so it covered Nick Swann. But he kept an eye on Jim Strong.

"What Sam says goes for me," he said. "I don't like the idea of letting you have anything on us, Nick. If the cops pick you up, you'd squeal on us to save yourself a rap. You knock off a cop—an' you're in as deep as us."

"No, no!" exclaimed Nick Swann. "Not—that!"

With his free hand, Smoky brought out Jim Strong's Police Positive. He emptied all but one cartridge from it. "Okay, Nick," he said. "Here's the rod. You use it—on the copper. An' I got my own gun on you while you're doing it."

NICK SWANN backed away. Sam Tabor chuckled. "Go ahead, Nick. Otherwise, we'll take it you figure on double-crossing us. If we're all in the same soup, we can stick together."

Smoky extended Jim Strong's pistol to the sleek fur coat salesman. Strong saw the perspiration on Swann's forehead. But he saw, too, that Swann took the gun.

He held up his hand. "Now, wait a minute, folks. *I* got something to say about this——"

"You have like——" snapped Smoky.

Swiftly, Strong dropped his head and blew with all his breath onto the palm of his left hand. In that palm had reposed a spoonful or two of a grayish powder. It cascaded straight into Smoky's face.

Smoky yelled and clawed at his face with one hand. With the other he began pulling the trigger of his automatic. But Strong was no longer in front of it. At the moment of blowing, he had thrown himself violently to one side.

He collided with Sam Tabor, half knocked the fur manufacturer off his feet, then clawed at him with his left hand and smashed him a terrific blow with his right fist. Sam Tabor went back eight feet, hit the wall and slid to the floor.

A bullet, fired blindly by Smoky,

tugged at Strong's coat sleeve. He darted a quick glance at the firing gunman, ducked low and sprang behind Smoky. He lashed out at the gunman's right hand, missed it as Smoky coughed violently.

Smoky sensed Strong's proximity and although tears streaming from his eyes blinded him, he swung out in a wide circle and bumped Strong with his gun hand. Instantly, he squeezed the trigger. The bullet seared Strong's ribs.

He gasped and dropped to his knees. From there, he launched himself at the gunman in a savage flying tackle. He upset Smoky and *sprawled over him. He drove both* fists into the man's face, then clawed at the gun in Smoky's hand.

He got his fingers on it, and then something hard was jammed against the back of his neck.

"Drop it, copper!" snarled the voice of Nick Swann. The sleek crook who had balked at murder before, seemed willing enough to commit it now that the fight was definitely going against him and his freedom was at stake.

Strong let out a huge sigh. With victory in his grasp, he was being licked by the man he had considered the weak one of the band of crooks. He'd shot his bolt—there wasn't any more. Smoky would shoot him without compunction, even if Swann lost his nerve again. Smoky was almost unconscious on the floor, but he would revive in a moment.

Strong couldn't take that chance. He had to make his play against Nick Swann. He tensed himself, ready to heave upward and backward, even though he knew that Swann would in all probability shoot him.

And then—a gun thundered!

IT WASN'T the gun in Nick Swann's hand, though. That hand suddenly relaxed and the gun fell on Strong. And Swann—— Strong saw him falling backward. Quickly, he looked up—into the face of John Murdock, the D. A. With him were a couple of uniformed policemen.

"This is one time you ought to be glad I wouldn't let you play a lone hand," chuckled the D. A.

Strong shook his head. "You followed me?"

"Yep. I——" Murdock sneezed, suddenly and violently.

Strong's own nostrils were twitching. He scrambled to his feet, rubbed his nose—and sneezed.

"What the devil makes me—*achoo!"* The D. A. sneezed again.

Soon the cops were also sneezing. It was three minutes later—in the front room of the Tabor Fur Co.—before Strong could explain about the sneezing. He exhibited a small round pill box to the D. A.

"I dug this up in my gadget room this afternoon," he said. "Notice the name on it—Tabor Revitalizer Co. Yeah, it was put out by Sam Tabor. I sent him to jail several years ago for it. He advertised it as a revitalizer, but our chemists proved it was nothing but a lot of snuff, pepper and powdered sugar, worth one-tenth of a cent per box. Sam sold it for five dollars. Well—it's going to *devitalize* Sam Tabor this time. If I hadn't stuck it in my pocket today——"

SPECIAL!

Kenneth Robeson, author of the very popular novels which appear in the Doc Savage Magazine, has agreed to heed the demands of our readers and give Crime Busters a new and different character! The first story will appear in the next issue, so don't miss it. Kenneth Robeson is one of the most famous action writers of today; you'll like his story!

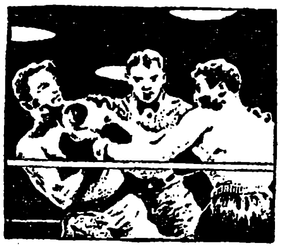
Continued from page 91

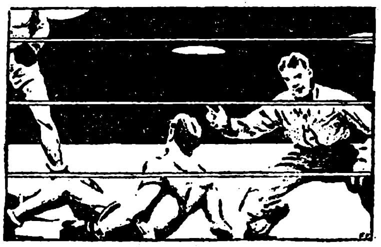
individuals. He used his vacation periods to make trips to other cities, so that he could interview people first-hand. And he used quite a bit of his own money in doing all this, for, although he was doing this with the permission of the department, it was not as part of his official work.

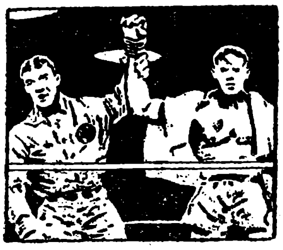
Many a man would have been discouraged, for by now Bennett had spent several years at the task. As time went by, the chances were getting tougher, because witnesses, if any, would be dying off, or going to other parts of the country. The trail was getting colder; conviction would be more difficult. But that did not deter Bennett. He was really getting somewhere now, he felt. His search was not fruitless; the evidence that he was on the right trail kept getting stronger and stronger.

While he was doing all this, he had to take some good-natured ribbing from his fellow officers. Here was a young officer, practically a youngster on the force, who had actually made a claim that he would solve one of the unsolved mysteries of the department, even if it took him twenty years to do it! One of his fellow officers even rigged up a little "calendar" on which he was going to mark off the years, just as students mark off the days toward vacation. In the course of the years, too, there were quite a few changes in the staff. Even the Chief who had

Continued on page 124







A MILLION DOLLARS FOR THESE FIGHTS WOULD BE CHICKEN FEED!

If Joe Louis could be matched against Bob Fitzsimmons, Schmeling against Corbett, Dempsey against Sullivan, et cetera. But they can't be matched. The nearest approach to witnessing such sensational fights is to read

OLD CHAMPS vs. NEW

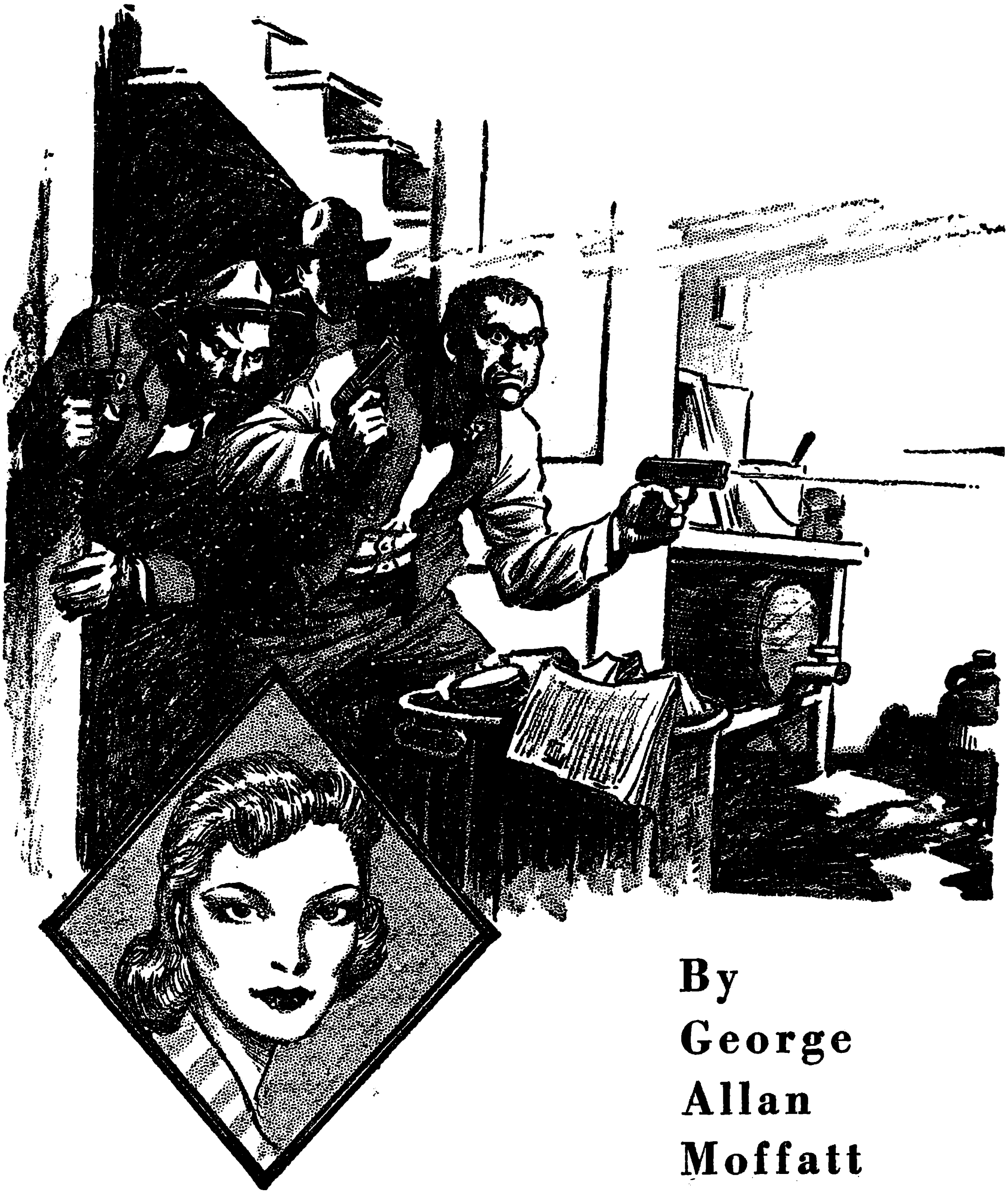
by WILLIAM INGLIS

who was boxing expert of the New York *Morning World* in the days when Sullivan, Corbett, Fitz, Tom Sharkey and Jeffries were in their prime. Now, in a dramatic series of articles in Street & Smith's Sport Story Magazine, this ringside veteran writes up thrilling accounts of fights between the old-timers and the outstanding modern fighters, based on his knowledge of them at their best.

Don't miss this unusual feature beginning in the 2nd June issue of *Sport Story Magazine*, published May 20th, 10 cents a copy.

Three Pencils Of Death

Ten-cent lead pencils; a pretty girl that wanted to kill him; a man that framed him for murder and paid him a thousand dollars for the chance—a sweet predicament for Duncan Dean, private shamus!



By George Allan Moffatt

CHAPTER I.

TEN-CENT CLUE.

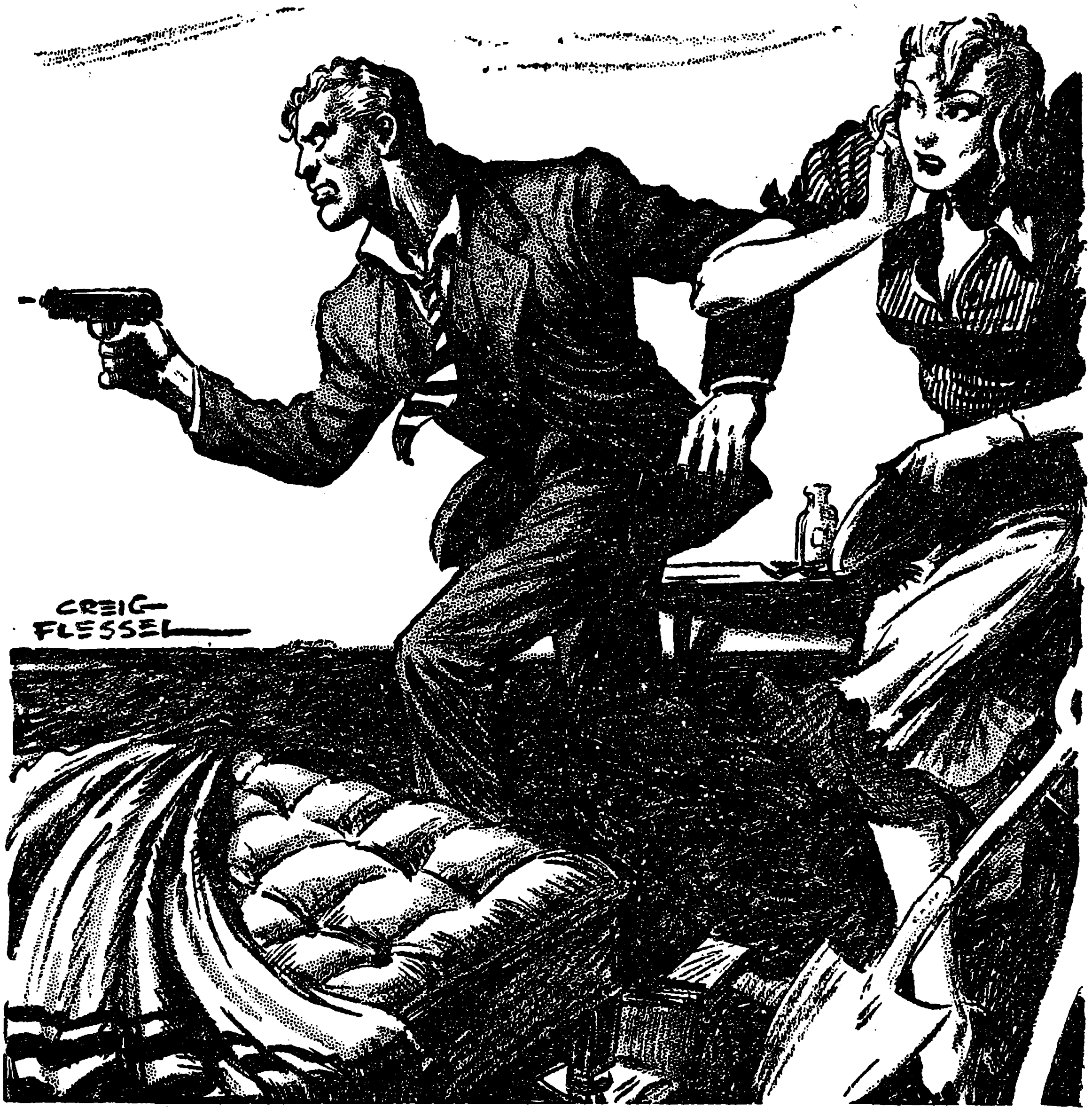
IT all seemed absurd and almost idiotic, standing there in the darkness, gripping an automatic and faced with the job of recovering a stolen automatic pencil that could be bought in the five-and-ten-cent store for a dime.

It had seemed just as insane to Duncan Dean that afternoon when the pasty-faced chap, who walked with a limp and blinked his black eyes nervously, entered his office and announced, without a trace of a smile, that he wanted to hire Duncan Dean to get that stolen pencil back.

Duncan Dean would have quickly classed his visitor as a lunatic, if it hadn't been for those blinking black eyes and the thin and tightly drawn face. There wasn't anything of the lunatic about them.

Not even when the man, who called himself Silas Fabry, climaxed the ludicrous scene by offering five thousand dollars for Duncan Dean's services and peeling ten one-hundred-dollar bills off a fat roll and handing the private detective a thousand dollars as a retaining fee.

Duncan Dean accepted quickly. He always took on cases that intrigued him. Commonplace mys-



teries never did, but a man that wanted to pay five thousand dollars for a lead pencil did.

Dean was a private detective and made his living at it, but there was nothing orthodox about his choice of work or how he handled it.

He was tall, with the sharp face of a college professor. Dean's hair was a flaming red and his impulsive temperament went with the color of his hair. His face was freckled and could be humorous—or hard and cold as granite.

And as he stood before the rambling white structure that was Philip McRay's home, the man supposed to have stolen the ten-cent lead pencil, his face was a mixture of humor and very chilled granite.

The McRay home was large, without any indication of wealth. It stood on a side street known for old houses and sometimes questionable characters. The house was dark, save for a yellow light that shone through a drawn white shade in a side room.

Duncan Dean looked at his wrist watch. It was nine o'clock. His blinking, black-eyed client had told him that McRay would be home at this hour, and this strange client was very insistent that Duncan Dean call on McRay at nine to recover the automatic pencil.

The freckled face of the unorthodox private detective was wreathed in a humorless smile as he walked up to the porch and the front door. A shadow passed across the lighted window. Through the drawn shade, it looked grotesque and misshapen.

Duncan Dean stopped at the door, reached down and gripped the doorknob. It turned and the door opened slowly and noiselessly. The hallway was dark and eerie as Dean slipped inside, his body flattening itself abruptly against the wall.

He tried to catch some trace of a sound in that blackness, but none came. He stayed against the wall.

SUDDENLY, a man screamed, pitifully and shrilly. Duncan Dean was away from the wall with a springing leap. The scream died away in the guttural gasps of death. The detective raced down the hallway toward the door of the room where the light shone from the window.

He stopped suddenly, collided against human flesh. A man cursed vilely. Something crashed against Duncan Dean's head.

The blow whirled Dean around in a dizzy circle, but as he spun around, the dick's right hand snapped his automatic up. It roared. The bullet crashed into the wall.

A second blow caught Dean flush on the side of the head. He went down, rolled over, shaking his head weakly.

The detective crawled to his hands and knees. He heard his attacker running out to the street.

Duncan Dean staggered to a standing position, wiped his sleeve across his eyes; but he didn't rush out of the house because by this time, the fleeing man was lost in the night.

Dean stumbled forward, toward a door that was open with light flooding out of it. He entered the room. He wasn't staggering any more. The detective's strength had returned and the effects of the two blows had passed.

Inside the door, Dean stopped, freckled face tightening and his bushy eyes squinting a little as he ran his fingers through his red hair.

Dean was staring at the body of a dead man, sprawled across the floor with a pool of blood under his shoulders.

DUNCAN DEAN took a long striding step forward, stopped at the side of the body. The dead man was lying half on his back, with his face looking up.

It was an unpleasant face, heavy and brutal, with a scar down the right cheek. Duncan Dean knew he was looking at the last earthly remains of Philip McRay. Silas Fabry had told him about the scar. He had told Dean enough about the man to make it certain that the body was that of McRay.

McRay had been shot through the back, the bullet coming out the center of his chest. The killer had used a silencer. There had been no roaring explosion before the scream of death.

Duncan Dean walked around the body, taking care not to touch it. His eyes darted over the room. It was poorly furnished. There was an old couch, a desk, a few chairs and other odd pieces of furniture.

A drawer to the desk was open. Papers were scattered on the floor. These papers were letters and bills. The drawer was empty, as were all the others.

Dean searched various parts of the room and then went through the pockets of the dead man. He stood up and looked around slowly.

Suddenly, the dick's head snapped up: Something was shining on the floor near the door. He walked over, saw a bright automatic pencil.

There was a streak of blood on the pencil. The tip was a crimson stain. Dean reached down and picked it up, turning it over in his hand. It was a typical automatic pencil, the type sold in the dime stores.

The tall detective looked at the bottom. There was a cross engraved on it, cut there by the end of a sharp penknife. Silas Fabry had told Dean this mark would be on the pencil he wanted.

The wild shriek of police sirens shattered the eerie stillness. Police cars stopped outside and detectives were rushing in the front door.

"Case the joint, Ricker," a booming voice bellowed. "This murder tip-off may not be as phony as it looks. Smells like a gun has just exploded around here!"

DUNCAN DEAN recognized the voice. It was Captain Mickey Murphy, hard, loud and relentless in his hate of private detectives—with Duncan Dean his pet hate.

Murphy came stomping toward the room. Duncan Dean, moving with catlike speed and silence, darted back behind the open door.

"Holy cats!" Murphy roared. "Here's a stiff, all bloody and as dead as a doornail!"

He took several steps inside the room. Duncan Dean slipped behind him and out into the darkened hallway. Murphy swerved quickly, sensing that someone had passed behind him, but all he saw was a wall of blackness.

A minute later, Duncan Dean went out a rear door and darted into the night. He didn't stop until he came to a broad avenue. It was deserted. The detective leaned against a tree and let his brain play with the puzzle of why a man resorted to the gag of a lead pencil to have him framed for murder.

It had been a murder frame-up. The police had come too quickly. They had been tipped off that McRay was dead. Someone knew that Detective Murphy's pet hate would be standing over the body.

What Murphy would have done if he had found Duncan Dean there, with one empty shell discharged from his automatic, needed no stretch of the imagination. It would have been a glorious moment for the copper.

Duncan Dean took the lead pencil he had found on the floor from his pocket, walked over and examined it beneath a street lamp.

He unscrewed the lead holder. There were four or five extra leads in it. He looked at a cross carved in the end with the point of a sharp knife. A taxi came cruising down the avenue, going too slow for that section of the city. It started to turn a corner, but apparently the driver changed his mind and the cab came toward where Duncan was standing.

The private detective hailed it. It stopped and he jumped in, saying to the driver, "988 Tremont Street."

Then he settled back in the rear seat. That address was the home of Silas Fabry.

Dean reached for his cigarette case, took one, lit a match and held it to the cigarette.

There was a movement at his side, a jarring thud as a gun went into his ribs.

A woman's voice said softly: "Good evening, Mr. Duncan Dean!"

CHAPTER II.

GUN MENACE.

DUNCAN DEAN held the burning match to his cigarette, puffed casually as he turned his face slightly to the right.

A girl was sitting there. She was small enough to have snuggled out of sight in the corner of the seat when Dean jumped in the cab. She was young, pretty, barely out of her teens, with hazel-blue eyes that were very frightened. Her face was pale.

The flaming match flickered, singed Duncan Dean's fingers. He snapped it out and again came the darkness. The gun was still in Dean's ribs. The taxi was roaring down the broad highway.

"Good evening," Duncan Dean said pleasantly. "But I didn't get your name——"

"Perhaps"—the girl's voice was low—"we had better talk about lead pencils."

A good-natured, laughing grunt came from Duncan Dean. "Lead pencils?" he said evasively.

The gun went harder in his ribs and the girl cried: "You got it! You stole it from McRay——"

Duncan Dean grunted again and felt the side of his jaw. It was still sore from the blow he had received in the hallway of the McRay house.

"Speaking about murder," he cut in dryly, "why did you drop that lead pencil after you killed McRay?"

The girl gave a sharp, terrified gasp. Duncan Dean took the lead pencil from his vest pocket.

"Still when I think about it," he continued, "you are pretty much of a mite of a thing to crack me as hard as you did. Maybe you didn't murder McRay."

He held the pencil up in the darkness. It gleamed a little. "You want this," he added. "All right, you can have it if you talk——"

The girl screamed: "That's the pencil! That's it—— I'll kill——"

Her free hand flew out for it, but her fingers never touched the pencil. Duncan Dean's right hand shot toward her fingers, closing on her wrist.

The gun roared. The bullet went flying up through the top of the taxi, then Duncan Dean was slipping the gun in his left coat pocket.

"Now," he said pleasantly enough, "we can talk business."

THE girl didn't talk. She lunged toward Duncan Dean, her fingers clawing his face and head with hysterical fury. The taxi driver had turned around. He was too frightened to stop his cab.

Duncan Dean pushed the girl back in the seat. She was still struggling, but her efforts were feeble——

It came with a clattering roar and a crunching of steel, as a barrage of machine-gun bullets shattered the window at the back of the cab and tore through the steel body.

One of the bullets creased Duncan Dean's neck. Warm blood was running down his shoulder, beneath his undershirt. Other bullets crashed through the glass between them and the driver.

The girl had slumped down in the seat. She had stopped crying. The taxi was careening dangerously. Right behind it, ready for a second blast, was a large closed car.

Duncan Dean's hand shot out, turned the door handle; as it turned, his foot kicked the door open and his left arm shoved the girl out of the careening taxi.

There was a second blast of machine-gun bullets, then a sickening crash. Duncan Dean remembered no more——

The detective came to with a whirling of distorted thoughts racing through his mind. He was lying on green grass. It was soft, cool. That was all he could reason out at first.

Dean crawled to his hands and knees, shook his head weakly to clear his brain. He began to remember things—vaguely and indistinctly. Staggering to his feet, Duncan Dean saw that the taxi had crashed into a tree.

The front wheels and the hood seemed wrapped around the tree. The driver was lying over the broken steering wheel, and the back of his head was covered with blood where a bullet had entered.

Duncan Dean brushed a hand across his sharp-featured face. He looked back toward the place where he had hurled the girl out of the car. But no girl lay on the grass.

HE walked back to the spot. A handkerchief lay there. Picking it up, Dean noted it was of excellent silk and scented with costly perfume. A woman's handbag had fallen back under a bush.

Duncan Dean reached for it. His fingers closed on the handle, but as they did, he went lunging headfirst into the bush. He landed on the other side in a sprawled heap.

Behind him, on the avenue, a police car was coming to a screeching stop. Duncan Dean, still holding the woman's bag, crawled on his hands and knees across a lawn and disappeared into the dense foliage of thick hedges.

A short time later, he safely reached a street two blocks away and hailed a cruising cab, after first making certain that he was not being followed. Dean knew that, within moments, the police would be combing the city for him.

He gave orders to the driver to just drive around for a while, then took out the two pencils. One he had found in the McRay home; the other had come from a secret compartment in the woman's handbag Dean had picked up. But the pencils didn't interest him as much as did the calling card that had also come out of the handbag. On it was engraved "Lucile Thornright."

Lucile Thornright! Duncan Dean's freckled face twisted with amazement when he read that name. The girl was the daughter of Godfrey Thornright, one of the wealthiest bankers in the city. She was at the top rung of the social ladder.

There had been trouble at Thornright's bank. The man was under indictment for a large shortage of funds, but this cloud had not affected Lucile's position in the exclusive society circles.

From his pocket, Duncan Dean removed a small diamond glass and examined one of the pencils more closely. There were three tiny numbers on it, engraved so small that the bare eye could not see them:

55—27—11

The second pencil, the one taken from the girl's handbag, had only two numbers on it; but after each number was a letter. The numbers and letters were:

54s—41e

But engraved before the numbers and letters was a mysterious-looking symbol that appeared like a cone with two points. To himself, Dean murmured, "Ten-cent lead pencils with numbers on them; a pretty girl that wants to kill you; a man that frames you for murder and pays you a thousand dollars for the chance—all very amazing!"

Duncan Dean jotted down the numbers of the pencils on a pad, studied the numbers, made marks over them. His face suddenly tightened and he leaned forward in the seat, passing the driver a note hastily written on another scrap of paper. He directed: "You get this to Detective Murphy at police headquarters."

The man started to say something, closed his mouth when Dean ordered, "Let me out here." A five-dollar bill had dropped on the cushion beside the driver.

The man grinned and said, "Sure thing, mister!"

After that, Duncan Dean hailed another cab and gave the driver the address of Silas Fabry's home.

CHAPTER III.

PHONY CLIENT.

THIS time he arrived at his client's home safely. It was a large house at the edge of the city, surrounded by bushes and vacant lots. It was dark, deserted-looking as Duncan Dean stepped out of the taxi and paid off the driver.

But as the private detective walked through the bushes to the front door, a light flickered momentarily in one of the windows and a shadowy form moved at one end of the house. Dean's sharp eyes caught these things; the fingers of his right hand became harder around the automatic in his coat pocket. He reached the front door.

Dean pushed the button. There was no answer. He pushed it again. From inside the house came the sound of the bell ringing shrilly.

The door opened suddenly. A man appeared. He was short, heavy-set, with a cold and expressionless face.

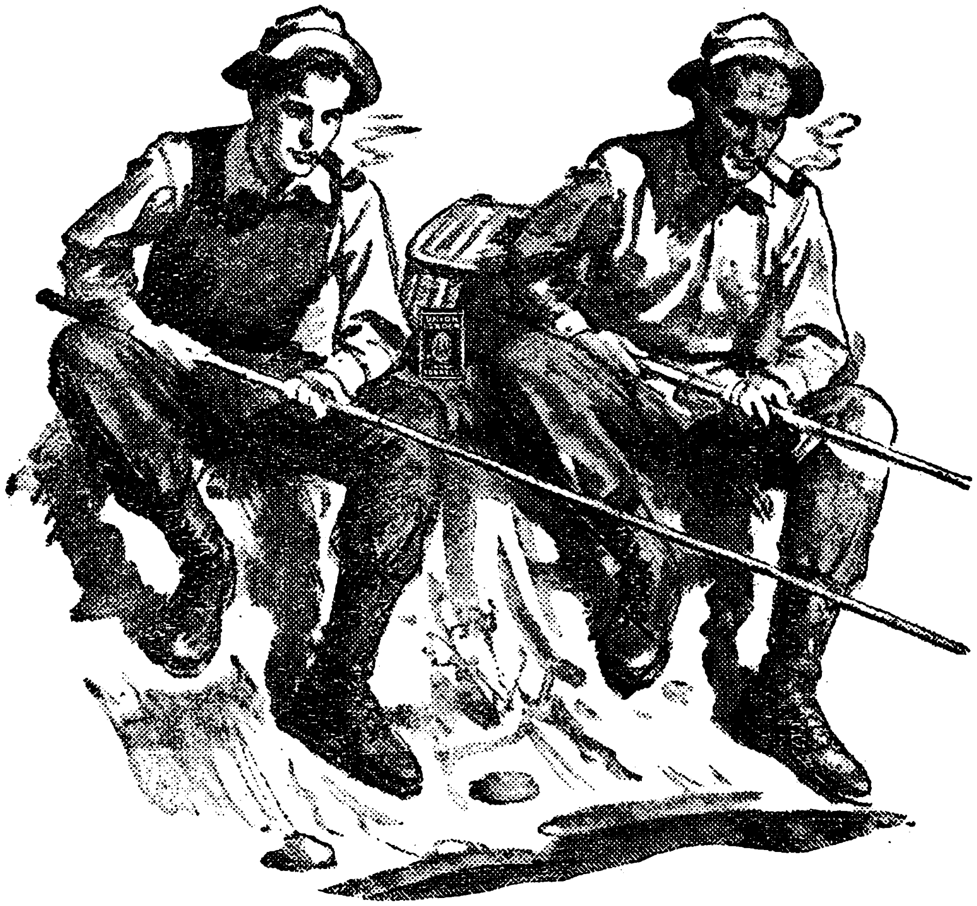
Duncan Dean said: "Tell Fabry I'm here."

The man opened the door wider. Duncan Dean stepped inside a wide hallway. The man said: "Okay, he wants to see you."

Duncan Dean grinned at the man, who started walking down the hallway. Dean followed, walking a little slower than his guide and taking in every detail of the hall.

His ears caught the sound of the heavy door closing and a lock snapping as it did. He heard the muffled sound of voices somewhere at the end of the hall, but these stopped abruptly.

His guide walked to a door, opened it, motioned Duncan Dean to go through. Something like a leering



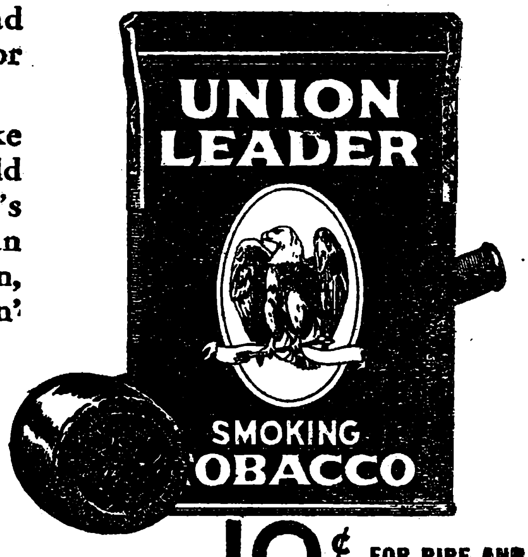
Like Father...like Son and Both like Union Leader

THERE'S a heap o' satisfaction for a man, when his son grows up with a lot o' the same tastes his Dad has. That just doubles a man's pleasure in fishin', or huntin' . . . or smokin' a pipe.

And, speakin' o' pipes, the number o' sons who take after their Dads in likin' Union Leader Tobacco would be amazin', if you didn't know that Union Leader's been givin' men the biggest tobacco value a dime can buy . . . for more than 30 years. Many a young man, who chooses mellow Union Leader, is simply provin' his "Old Man" had a lot o' sense.

Union Leader

THE GREAT AMERICAN SMOKE



10¢ FOR PIPE AND CIGARETTE

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smile came into the guide's face as Duncan Dean passed him and walked into a large room. The door closed behind the detective with a click.

Silas Fabry sat at a desk, his blinking black eyes staring at the detective. There were three other men in the room, seated in easy chairs. Their efforts not to notice Duncan Dean were a little strained.

"Well, Fabry," Duncan Dean drawled, "I got the pencil."

Silas Fabry tapped the desk with the forefinger of his right hand. His eyes didn't stop blinking. His pasty face was screwed up; shallow wrinkles showed around his mouth and eyes.

"Sit down, Dean," he said, motioning to a chair.

DUNCAN DEAN sat down, but didn't take the chair assigned to him. The three other men in the room were watching him now.

"By the way," the detective remarked, "that was a rather stupid attempt at framing me for murder, Fabry. I expect such things as that and usually protect myself. Take my gun, for instance. I use a special caliber because these ballistic experts are always finding the bullets."

"Interesting," Silas Fabry cut in dryly.

"There are other things about the murder that were just as stupid," Duncan Dean continued. "Dropping that pencil was inexcusable. You had a good idea, one that merits certain admiration. You wanted McRay killed, and you wanted the pencil. With him alive, the pencil wouldn't have been a comfortable thing to own. You knew my reputation with Detective Mickey Murphy. Pinning the murder on me was a simple thing—only you haven't done it."

Silas Fabry dropped the paper weight and settled back in his chair. His eyes wandered to the three men to his right and his left.

"Now that you have it all figured out," he said, "we can get down to business. Where is——"

"We'll get down to business," Duncan Dean snapped. "Where is Lucile Thornright? You tried to blast her out of the picture because she had the second pencil. I'm figuring you have the third one, to make those numbers on the other two make sense."

Duncan Dean's feet braced against the floor and the muscles in his legs bunched. His chair was directly in front of Silas Fabry.

Fabry's hand started for a drawer. The three men in the chairs were on their feet, their hands streaking for their coat pockets.

Dean didn't draw his automatic. He didn't have time. His legs straightened out, then his body left the chair in a headlong dive that took him over the table, crashing into Silas Fabry.

Fabry and his chair went back, with the detective sprawled over both. He twisted his right arm around Fabry's neck, then brought it around in a yank of the arm.

Duncan Dean struggled to his feet. Fabry, unconscious from the collision, served as a shield before the detective. The three men gaped at him with their automatics in their hands.

Duncan Dean brought his automatic out. "Drop your guns," he rapped. "Back to the door and open it."

They dropped their guns, Duncan Dean was walking toward them, holding Silas Fabry in front of them.

One of the men opened the door. The hallway was dark, but in this darkness lurking men moved in crouching positions. Duncan Dean saw them. From the corners of his eyes he also saw the three men at his side, waiting to lunge at him.

He hesitated a moment. Silas Fabry was regaining consciousness, groaning and twisting in Duncan Dean's grip.

A foot scraped across the floor in the darkness of the hall. Then Duncan Dean moved. He pivoted on his toes, bringing the body of Silas Fabry around as a human bludgeon.

He let Fabry fly toward the three men at his right. He heard their muffled curses as the body hit them and sent them down.

Duncan Dean leaped for the doorway; but as he did, three roaring, stabbing flashes of orange-red came out of the darkness to greet him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAW VS. DEAN.

THE DETECTIVE went through the darkness, head down and shoulders within a foot of the floor. Three bullets whined over his head and crunched into wood and plaster far behind him.

He hit the floor like a bouncing ball, coming up on his hands and knees and lurching down the hall. No lights were on in the hall. The darkness was black and impenetrable.

The house came to life with screaming and shouting men. Guns roared; then they stopped. Duncan Dean was on his feet now, racing down the hall. He crashed into the wall with a sickening thud.

His hands went out, groping in the darkness. Then, suddenly, there was no darkness. The hall was flooded with brilliant light. Duncan Dean saw a doorway a few feet away.

He went flying through this as guns started to roar again and men came racing for him. Inside the room, he was once more in darkness. He stumbled over a chair. Dishes and pans came down on his head with a clattering roar.

Men came into the room. The rasping voice of Silas Fabry sounded out in the hall. Then the detective heard a different sound.

Somewhere off to Duncan Dean's right came the faint moan of a girl. It seemed to come from under him.

Three guns roared in the doorway as he moved in the darkness. One bullet creased his shoulder. Another zipped across his cheek. The third went over his head and shattered a window.

His gun belched fire twice. Dean fired from the hip as he threw himself to the right, in the direction of the faint moaning of the girl. A man in the doorway screamed, hit the floor with a thud. The two other men fired again, then leaped back into the hall.

Duncan Dean's shoulder hit the wall. His hands followed it. He touched a door, reached down and grabbed the knob. It turned and the door opened. A burst of damp air greeted him. A man came through the darkness, hitting him across the hip.

Dean went stumbling into the darkness beyond the door. He didn't stop, and the next thing he knew he was tumbling down a stairs. He hit a cement floor, his senses going around like a windmill.

He crawled weakly to his feet, shook his head. He was still holding his automatic. The moans of the girl came to him clear and distinct now. He swerved toward them.

Silas Fabry was yelling orders upstairs. There was a light in the kitchen. It flooded down into the cellar of the house where Duncan Dean had fallen. A shaft of this light caught him as he was stumbling toward the moans of the girl.

Guns roared and bullets clipped the cement floor around him, then he heard Silas Fabry give another wild yell. Lights flashed on in every part of the cellar. Their brilliance blinded Duncan Dean for a second. But in a flash, he was at a door.

It was locked. His gun snapped up, sent a bullet through the lock. Duncan Dean lunged against the door and went headfirst into a cellar room.

THE light from the flashlights flooded through the open door. He saw a couch. Lucile Thornright lay on it, tied hand and foot, and partly gagged.

Duncan Dean swerved and sent two bullets out into the cellar. Two men rushing through the door went down.

Lucile Thornright threw herself off the couch and fell to the floor. Duncan Dean had a knife out and was slashing the ropes around her ankles and wrists.

She struggled to her feet. Her hair was down. Her face was pale and bloody. But the fear Duncan Dean had seen in her eyes before was gone. They were flashing with a helpless fury.

"Mr. Duncan Dean!" she gasped in amazement.

"The gentleman," Duncan Dean answered, "that so rudely kicked you out of the taxi."

She looked at him. Dean had turned and was watching the door of the room. Men were outside, but none braved a certain bullet by trying to come inside.

"You're a fool to come here," Lucile Thornright answered. "Do you know who Silas Fabry really is?"

"I gather," Duncan Dean replied with a laugh, "that he isn't a very nice gentleman."

A barrage of bullets came through the door. Duncan Dean pushed the girl back against the wall, out of range of the bullets.

"Stay there," he said curtly. "You've been a big enough little fool up to now. You're going to take orders for a change and use some sense."

She laughed, hoarsely and coldly. "Fine time for me to use sense," she retorted. "Our chances of getting out of this cellar alive are about fifty billion to one. This house is full of killers——"

Duncan Dean wasn't listening to her. He had dropped to one knee and was slipping a fresh clip in his automatic. Men were crowding to the door. A gun roared and a bullet clipped the wall near him.

He got up, backed to where Lucile was standing against the wall. "You've got one chance in fifty," Duncan Dean said, "to get out of this cellar alive. I'm going to start fireworks. You stay here until the smoke gets thick enough for you to sneak out."

"Excellent for me," Lucile retorted, "but what are your chances?"

"That," Duncan Dean answered, "depends on a friend of mine."

He crept up to the door. From outside came no sound, yet men stood there, waiting for the first move of the private detective.

For a split second he hesitated near the door, in a half-crouching position; then, with a lunge, he went out into the cellar, his body going through the air like a torpedo.

THE men outside the door stood stunned and bewildered by this move, but in the next split second they got into action; as they did, Duncan Dean was near the cellar stairs, squatting on his heels, his automatic belching a deadly fire.

Three of them went down from

his bullets. A slug crashed into his left shoulder with a jarring thud. Another burned through the flesh of his leg.

Four men were in front of him. Dean leaped for them as his automatic clicked on an empty barrel. A bullet went through the flesh of his forearm. He collided with a pair of legs, his arms going around them.

The detective heard Lucile's scream. He had no time to see where the scream came from. He had yanked the pair of legs his arms were around and a man came down on his head and shoulders.

His brain was swimming, a film was forming over his eyes. He saw an automatic lying near him. Fingers closed on it.

Dean brought it up. He fired point-blank at a man over him. The man grabbed his throat and slid to the floor.

Duncan Dean was on his knees. Three more men were in front of him. They looked grotesque and phantomlike.

A gun roared. A bullet hit him somewhere. He went down. A man was standing over him. It was Silas Fabry.

Duncan Dean closed his eyes. He didn't have the strength to get off the floor. There was a deafening roar; then another and another.

Then somebody was yanking him to his feet. They weren't pleasant about it.

A voice said: "Okay, Dean, your little game is up. This time you'll answer a charge of murder."

Duncan Dean didn't recognize the man at first; then, slowly, the features of Detective Mickey Murphy became visible.

CHAPTER V

DESERT CACHE

UPSTAIRS in the room where Silas Fabry had waited for him, Duncan Dean began to regain some of his senses. A shot of whisky

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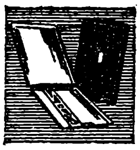

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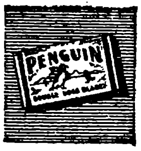

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had brought the blood back in his muscles and had cleared his brain.

A doctor had bandaged his wounds, found them only flesh injuries. He was weak from loss of blood, but he could stand up and stare at Detective Murphy with a certain degree of amusement.

Silas Fabry was there, between two policemen. His thin face was pale and twisted as he watched Duncan Dean. Lucile Thornright sat in a chair, her face white but her eyes flashing. She had not tried to run out of the cellar when Duncan Dean made his attack. She was in the midst of the fight when the police came rushing down from the kitchen.

Duncan Dean said to Murphy: "Funny that you would have to be the man to save my life, but I had it figured that way. I had a taxi-driver tip you off that I would be here. I timed it pretty close, though, and had you been a second later I would have been dead."

"Yeah," Captain Murphy blustered. "You'd been dead all right, but I saved you for the electric chair."

"Not this time," Duncan Dean laughed. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I didn't kill Philip McRay. Silas Fabry killed him, and the reason is very obvious."

Duncan Dean walked to the desk, pulled out three automatic lead pencils and laid them down side by side.

"This afternoon," he explained to Murphy, "Silas Fabry came to my office and hired me to recover a stolen pencil from Philip McRay. He offered me five thousand dollars to get a ten-cent pencil back. Sounds foolish, doesn't it?"

"Foolish?" Murphy roared. "It sounds insane!"

Duncan Dean picked up one of the pencils, turned it over in his fingers, looked at Silas Fabry and grinned. Fabry blinked his black eyes, started to snarl something.

"Not insane," Duncan Dean said to

Murphy, "when you figure the pencil Fabry wanted is worth a half a million dollars."

DETECTIVE MURPHY was puzzled and still mad.

"What are you talking about?" he yelled. "Who is this Silas Fabry?"

"One of the cleverest crooks that ever came out of the East," Duncan Dean answered. "His real name is Louie Flurette. But we'll go back to the shortage in Thornright's bank, the shortage that he is under indictment for and for which he faces a prison sentence.

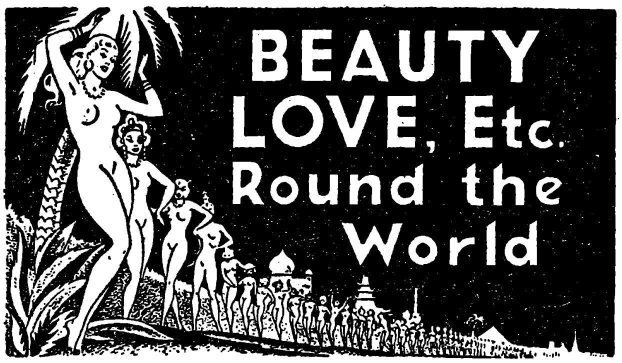
"Last week, the man who served as butler to Thornright was found mysteriously murdered. I happened to know that this man was also as smooth a crook as ever walked the streets. He came to the west coast broke, got a job as butler in the Thornright home.

"He kept his eyes open and learned that Thornright did a lot of banking at his home. One night Thornright brought a half million dollars in bonds home to float a special deal. The butler rifled the safe and got the bonds. Thornright couldn't make up the shortage and he was indicted.

"The butler was playing a safe game, but about this time Fabry entered the picture. He had worked with the butler in the past, but they were deadly enemies. Philip McRay also got interested. He figured, as Fabry did, that the butler had lifted the bonds.

"Fabry and McRay were killers. The butler realized, when they appeared, that he was a marked man. He knew he was facing certain death. So he concocted a sweet revenge. He hid the bonds and marked the hiding place on three lead pencils. He gave Fabry one and McRay one.

"He knew they would soon find out that one pencil was useless without the other. They would start fighting over the pencils and kill each other. To make sure that this would hap-



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pen, he had a third pencil marked. He gave this to Lucile Thornright, who was trying to save her father.

"Fabry killed the butler when he got his pencil, then Fabry learned that there were two other pencils he had to get. So he hired me to get the one from McRay. He killed McRay before I got there and got the pencil, but when he ran out of the room, he dropped it. Fabry tipped the police off that I was there. He didn't want another murder on his hands until he got the loot, and I looked like a pretty easy frame—because the police hated me.

"But I found the pencil. Later, I met Lucile Thornright. She knew that Fabry hired me to get the pencil from McRay. I got her pencil. I saw the numbers on them. They didn't make sense at first, but suddenly they did. The butler was also a seaman. 55—27—11 could mean 55 degrees, 27 minutes, and 11 seconds west. It would have to be longitude if it marked the place of the bonds, because if it were latitude, it would throw it over in Russia somewhere.

"On the pencil I got from Miss Thornright, were only two numbers—54s and 41e. There was a two-pointed cone symbol before these numbers. That could mean a two-pointed rock in the desert, a hundred miles from here."

DEAN smiled, continued with:

"I was guessing, but I knew if I could get the pencil Fabry had, I would know just how much guesswork it was. I came here to get that pencil and to save Miss Thornright's life, because Fabry had tried to blast her in the taxi. He picked her up, and in his hurry, apparently didn't see me. She didn't have the pencil, but I knew she would live until he got it.

"So I got here. When the fight started, I got my arm around Fabry's neck. While it was there and I was carrying him, I frisked him for the pencil and found it. Here it is.

There are three numbers on it. Translate them into latitude and you have 28 degrees, 18 minutes, and 7 seconds north. Get hold of a Mercator's projection map and you'll find this bearing locates you out in the desert less than a hundred miles from here, near a two-pointed, cone-shaped rock.

"Follow the instructions about going 54 yards south and 41 yards east, and you'll find where the half million dollars in bonds stolen by the butler are buried. If you take a look at Fabry, you'll see that I have hit it right."

Murphy glared at Fabry. The man's face was trembling with fury that he couldn't control. The three henchmen of his, however, were trembling with fear.

"These three men," Duncan Dean said, pointing to the henchmen, "are facing the electric chair for murder. I think they are willing to talk and tell you Fabry murdered McRay—that is, if talking will help them."

The men were ready to talk. They all started at once, but Murphy quieted them by yelling, "Shut up! You'll get plenty of chance to talk."

Duncan Dean grinned at Murphy's anger and said, "Maybe sometime you'll get me in the electric chair, Murphy."

Murphy returned the grin, as he said: "I'm sending a man that owes you four thousand dollars to the electric chair. That's some consolation."

"But those bonds," Duncan Dean laughed. "Don't forget there is a handsome reward for them."

Murphy grunted angrily and said nothing. Lucile Thornright got up, walked over to Duncan Dean, said, "You earned the reward, Mr. Dean. And I want you to know that I think you are a wonderful man."

Duncan Dean's freckled face flushed with embarrassment and got as red as his ruffled hair.

Murphy snickered: "Lord, ain't he sweet!"

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CHIEF BENNETT

Continued from page 107

originally given Bennett permission to pursue this case on his own had resigned before Bennett finally got his evidence.

At last Bennett thought he had his case. He had, by tracing down all the Army deserters, finally come down down to the person he suspected was guilty. He had enough evidence to convince himself of that guilt, but not enough to prove it in court. There was only one way to do that—get one other man who might be used as witness.

Having marked his guilty man and making certain he could get him any time, Bennett went after the essential witness. It took him many more months before he could round that man up, but he got him.

At first the man claimed to know nothing about the crime; but finally he broke down and admitted that he knew about the murder; that he refused to take part in it. And everything was just as Bennett had expected it to be: The murderer knew of the cab driver's trips to Snake Hill, where he took the "mystery" woman to keep appointments with an Army deserter hiding out there. The murderer planned to hire the cab for a trip to Snake Hill, then hold up the driver. In the attempted hold-up, the driver was killed.

Having the witness, Bennett went after the real murderer and brought him in. Faced with all the evidence, and the witness, the murderer could do nothing else but admit his part, and thus end the five-year hunt for the answer to the Snake Hill riddle.

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In addition to his years on the force, he had a splendid service record in the Army, which gave him further qualification for the job.

There is nothing very spectacular about this rise; there is nothing to sound trumpets and shoot flares about. But there is a real success story; a typically American success story which shows that real work counts in the end.

HOW OUR READERS VOTED

Continued from page 55

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NEXT MONTH

Here's some of the fare we have lined up for you in our next month's issue. It's the best issue we've prepared thus far, so don't miss it!

"SLINGSHOT MAGIC"

Another Carrie Cashin story by

Theodore Tinsley

"THE GHOST THAT CAME BACK"

Norgil the Magician in a spooky novelette by

Maxwell Grant

"THE WILD INDIANS"

A wild tale of Indians, murder, and the Gadget Man, by

Lester Dent

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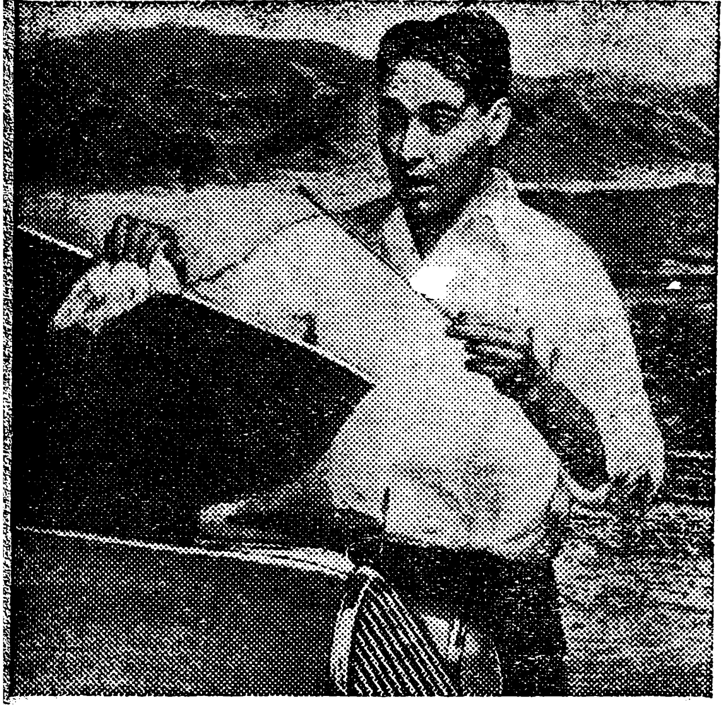

If Your Motor Wastes Oil and Gas—If It Has Lost That "New Car" Power, Speed and Quiet, Send Coupon Below For Free Sample of Miner's Amazing Mineral Discovery

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Nearly a half-million motorists have used this revolutionary method of cutting oil and gas waste caused by worn rings and cylinders. Savings up to 50% reported. Give your car new power, pep, speed and quiet with this amazing mineral discovered in the Rocky Mountains. Awarded A.T.L. Seal of Approval.

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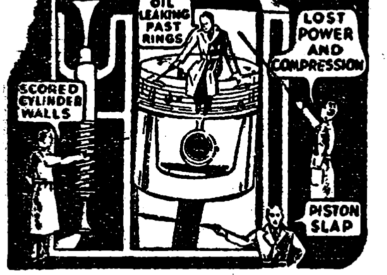

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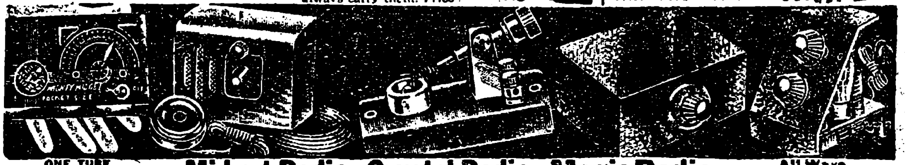

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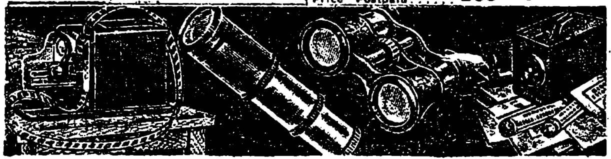

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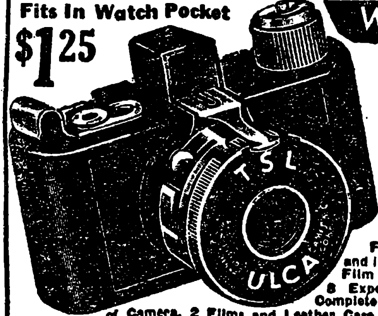

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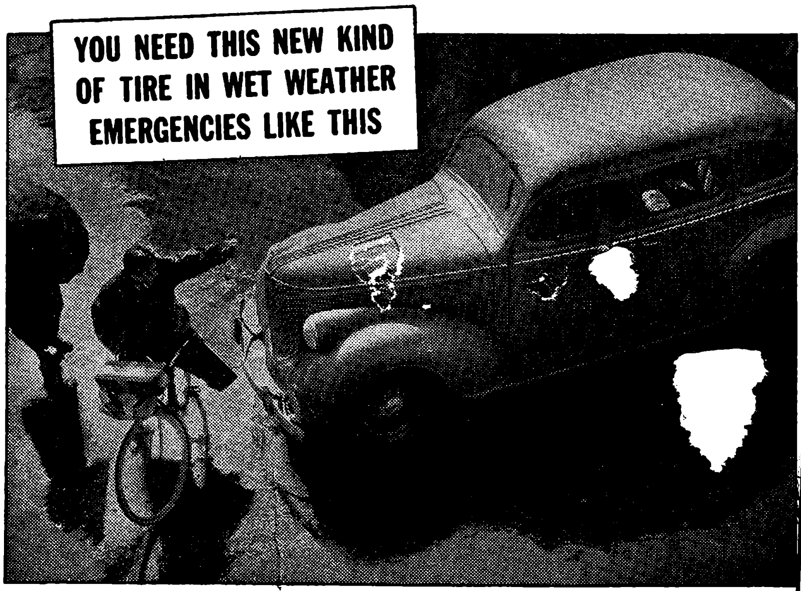
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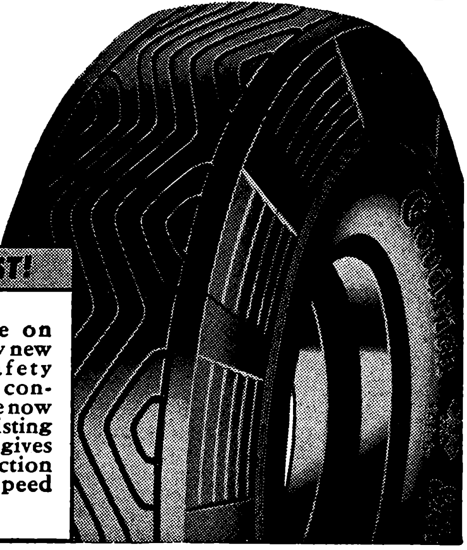

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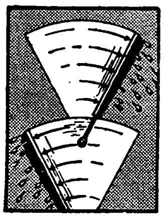

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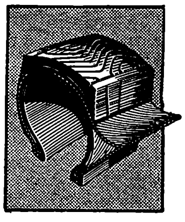

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